

ACTING OUT OF CHARACTER

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At the age of eight, I vividly recall not wanting to leave the movie theater after *Raiders of the Lost Ark* ended. I was infatuated with the credits rolling down the screen; curious as to what all these people did in order to bring a film to life.

Little did I know that this interest would eventually evolve into a career producing independent films. But not without first going on my own planetary journey as the protagonist in a multi-layered plot similar to that of a three-act film screenplay.

My first creative milestone early on in Act I was my senior year of high school on Staten Island when we had the opportunity to learn the inner workings of the community television station through our Speech and Media class. Our teacher encouraged us to find a direction within the studio setting. You could choose to engage with lights, sound, camera, or even appear on-camera.

I immediately chose to be behind the scenes and I've never been entirely sure why—perhaps being shy or unable to fully articulate myself publicly at the time.

This led to a volunteer trainee opportunity with a local political talk show, where I learned how to operate a TV camera by steadying the large, cumbersome beast to and fro throughout the studio. The content of the shows was so amusing at times that it was hard to always keep a steady hand. The host was controversial, to say the least

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—sort of the Charlie Rose of Staten Island liberal politics.

My creativity really came from making opportunities when there weren't any. An inciting incident occurred during my sophomore year at college after evolving out of a journalism program more focused on print, radio, and photography. I wanted to learn more about broadcast television production but walked into an old, outdated TV studio dressed in cobwebs. I eventually convinced the communications director to have it cleaned up, so I could learn all ends of the technology while gaining three college credits at the same time. He liked the idea so much that it became an officially accredited class ever since.

We also created college campus video news stories in our sleepy agricultural cow-town. So, from out in the field to back in the studio—there was shooting, editing, camera operation, lighting, sound recording, and mixing – all hands-on skills that could be applied to a profession in the broadcast television industry.

Later on in Act I, fresh out of college, my buddy and I decided we would make a 16-millimeter film by figuring out how to do it on our own—rather than spending a small fortune getting a post-graduate university degree through a film academy or institute. We talked a good game but realized we had no idea what we were getting ourselves into, especially \$25'000 later.

Eventually, we had a finished forty-minute film, after a labor-intensive editing process on one of those old flatbed editing machines where you had to precisely fine-cut (splice) the film reels together clip by clip—one slight hand slip-up and you may have lost your best take. We were proud to have a premiere screening at the New York Film Academy for all of our friends and family (investors) to enjoy.

Shortly thereafter, I took on a tape operator trainee position at a television post-production facility that involved duplicating and converting a variety of video formats for the Arts & Entertainment Network (A&E) and The History Channel.

As for the final assignment in order to pass the tape operator

exam, you had to loop a one-inch large reel (similar to a 35-mm film) through an endless maze of spindles. The slightest alteration could easily spin thousands of feet of tape out of control, damaging hours of archived footage and the machine itself. There was a first-aid kit nearby for safety. I somehow managed to pass the test and became mentored under my new boss, who could detect a digital broadcast hit or any form of resolution inequality from a mile away.

Something really started to change in me around this time, however. A form of independent spirit kept driving me further away from the familiar. I became increasingly lost, not knowing what community to fit into (along with a growing political dissent). It's hard to really place my finger on why I became this detached, yet I knew I had a desire to break away from the systematic approaches I saw all around me as they became more and more unappealing. The option to develop a career in an extremely competitive New York City job market while spending a fortune to live in a walk-in closet apartment did not seem logical anymore. I began to ask myself. What does another city have in store? What does another country have in store? What does another continent have in store?

Perhaps I felt that the grass was greener on the other side and that re-inventing myself in a completely foreign land would provide a clean slate to begin from by integrating into a distant culture on a spontaneous whim. Would leaving the U.S. lead to a different kind of creative life altogether and perhaps change my jaded perspective? The key questions became: How do I re-invent myself? How do I find a way to be a big fish in a small pond, rather than a small fish in a big pond?

Perhaps this approach may have been more about doing the opposite of what everyone else was doing by simply being rebellious. And if the trade-off was somehow finding a way to survive in a new country that represented my core values, then the risk of not having as much money in the bank or the right pension plan was well worth it to me.

This was a motivating force because it prevented me from re-

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maining stagnant in the same country culture for too long.

Assuming that being born into our native country is not necessarily the right society in which one can co-exist harmoniously given there is a choice of 200 or more countries to live in. It's like going into an ice-cream parlor and only being satisfied with trying one flavor for your entire life. I also think a combination of my being stubborn, narcissistic, and ego-driven propelled my leaps to such a great distance away.

This first part of my foreign journey began by leaving New York behind and venturing up to Montreal, Canada, after a previous summer's jaunt enticed me enough to try living there. Such an amazing metropolis, as you would never know there are 3.5 million people living there amongst the seamless integration between parks and urban culture. I did the door-to-door résumé (CV) drops in person to as many video post-production houses as I could, attempting to make good first impressions through these spontaneous visits. The Québécois were not as receptive to this as much as some other cultures might be, as I would find out later on during my future career endeavors.

After three months, and around my fifty-ninth visit, I struck a bit of luck finally getting an interview for a tape operator position that required duplicating and converting various video formats and doing the quality control check of each. The woman I interviewed with liked my prior experience and training from New York. So much so that I received a call-back a few weeks later:

“Bonjour. C'est Kevin?” “Oui, c'est moi.” “We have some good news— and perhaps some bad news to inform you with.”

“Okay, so tell me the good news first.”

“We would like to offer you the position.”

“That's good news, indeed, what could the bad news possibly be?” “The position is not here.”

“Well, where is it, then?” “It's in New York.”

I declined the offer and ended up plugging away at various restaurant jobs, including working as a cook's prep assistant, learning

how to delicately fry calamari to the utmost perfection and identifying the sour parts of arugula salad. I had my meals covered, so that saved on much of my food expenses. I also wrote a few articles for a local weekly entertainment newspaper about the American-to-Canadian transition.

The travel bug bit me again and I also felt I needed to gain a different perspective and a fresh start somewhere more foreign than Montreal. I ventured overseas deciding to dive head first into a pool of linguistic loss by not knowing the language, and taking on the challenge of integration shortly after a new right wing conservative anti-immigration political party took power. Copenhagen, Denmark was my next new home - the land of *hygge* (comfort and coziness), the Jante Law, (no hierarchal societal structure) biking, and beautiful people.

I was searching for socialistic values, striving to learn more about how communities work together, rather than the U.S. model of overly celebrating the individual (hard to interpret in a world of eight billion people). Reading the *Culture Shock!* book on Denmark offered little in the way of preparation for what was to lay ahead. I became employed under the most unlikely of circumstances after once again pounding the pavement, submitting my résumé to over a hundred media companies throughout the city until my shoes were sole-less. This was the fittest I've ever been in my entire life, though. Most of those who greeted me were quite friendly. "Why don't you come in for a spot of tea?" he or she may have remarked, for example. I still had no work permit, yet created an illusion that it was easy to achieve (as an American who spoke garbled broken Danish at the immigration office). I took some Danish language lessons prior to my moving, but the tutor kept remarking on how my Danish had French pronunciations.

Eventually, I met a guy who knew a guy who knew another guy, who recommended that we meet. I then somehow got the go-ahead as a cameraman to shoot a video news release of a local entertainment event going on around Copenhagen. When the producer was

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unable to make it that day, I told my employer that I could assume this position, as long as he could quickly find another cameraman. I really had no idea what I was doing, other than the fact that I had to ask questions with a microphone in my hand. Humility comes with the art of labor.

Proving you have the creative ability throughout a profession is one thing—actually using your creative ability to get a job in a foreign country requires an entirely different form of creativity altogether.

Learning how to work, live, and survive where you are lost in translation was by no means an easy undertaking; however not being able to overhear what many people are saying did have its advantages.

The same philosophy applied some years later when I moved once again. It was time for another re-boot, this time to Geneva, Switzerland. Act II was about to begin.

It was another opportunity to be cleverly creative figuring out survival without that work and residence permit. My partner at the time applied for hundreds of jobs, with little traction and funding to support this venture of ours running thin. You couldn't really go door to door anymore with CV in hand, as electronic transmission became the only acceptable norm, leaving all your experience and the chance to be physically present lost in the vast digital domain. But if our plan worked, the rewards of living in Switzerland would be so enormous to us. Beautiful geography, robust infrastructure, high quality of living; a utopia.

I met a British chap, who ran a European global communications company, at a local pub, under what I presumed to be rather casual circumstances. But once he received a phone call informing his friend that he was busy conducting an interview, I had to step up my game. I think I made a good first impression—our competencies in French were more or less on the same footing between our British and American accents.

I didn't hear back for several weeks, and my partner and I had to decide whether or not to return to New York or continue finding another way to become employable. Then I received a phone call

in the early hours of the morning, asking if I was available to meet in Lausanne (a city one-third the size of Geneva, forty-five minutes away). I got there as quickly as I could—three people interviewing me this time, with the rising lakeside sun glaring in my eyes, children screaming by an adjacent playground, and the obvious nervous pressure of not seeming as desperate as I was. I sold myself quite well, convincing these higher-ups that I was capable of taking on the New Business Developer/Producer position they were offering. I eventually became an executive producer, living in Switzerland for seven years and working in over twenty countries, producing corporate films and video webcasts. The only consequence was being assigned film projects in countries you would prefer leaving off your itinerary, including the Ivory Coast and Nigeria, that were ravaged with war and ongoing incidences of terrorism.

One of our biggest productions occurred every January in the cozy confines of the majestic, snowy Swiss Alps. For five years in a row, I was a producer at the World Economic Forum's annual conference in Davos. We managed the live video webcasts and produced a highlights video of the entire conference—hundreds of hours of footage that needed to be edited down into a tiny little ten-minute segment. Our creativity really came into play by having to connect a multitude of video machines through a plethora of cables entangled as if it were a string theory formula.

The conference featured world leaders, heads of state, politicians, celebrities, and innovative activists, all adhering to the World Economic Forum's model of "Improving the State of the World." We conducted interviews with various high-ranking politicians and celebrities, such as Bono, Tony Blair, Gordon Browne, Bill Gates, Queen Rania of Jordan, and so on.

When I was nearing the end of my tenure in Switzerland and thinking about returning to New York, I started coming up with a new start-up concept, under the premise that filmmakers from all around the world could share resources to produce one feature-length

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narrative film. Yet, I was determined to follow through on my long-lived dream of film producing. For every one producer I began to meet, though, there seemed to be thousands of writers, directors, and actors, and it was very hard to learn about a profession in which you couldn't meet a mentoring producer.

When you did, they were quite secretive with regard to their magic formula for getting their films packaged and financed.

I then had the good fortune to meet one of the founders of CollabFeature, who were doing more or less what I was envisioning in my start-up concept, except they were already several years ahead, after producing two feature films in which up to forty filmmakers from twenty-five countries all contributed different pieces to the feature length film's narrative puzzle.

The philosophy is that, rather than millions of independent filmmakers all competing for the same tiny spaces to get their films shown at film festivals, you collectively team together. It's also a way to advance your career forward, showing that you were a director, or cinematographer, or actor, editor, etc. in an international feature-film project. The other advantage is in the fact that we can access public funding opportunities within each filmmaker's respective country. This includes co-production agreements, tax incentives, broadcaster funds, and film commission support. This filmmaking support counteracts the ninety percent of all American movies being produced by one of the seven major Hollywood studios and the lack of government subsidies to support independent film and original creative stories rather than the redundant violence-driven films.

Reflecting back on this story's timeline taught me that it wasn't so much about being creative within the work itself, but being creative in finding the job, given all of the obstacles that needed to be overcome, from work and residence permits, language comprehensions, cultural identities, the tightly gated film fraternity, and, most importantly, the employer's belief in you. Maybe it wasn't about having as many of the qualifications as the next employee candidate did—but being brave enough to take on challenges that the next

candidate did not.

At the same time, the technology curve throughout these three decades was constantly evolving. Every few years a video format would change along with all of the machinery that coincided with it. You really had to be up to speed on the latest trends; otherwise, you could quickly find yourself out of a job. What used to be four positions is now really one, when you consider shooting, interviewing, recording sound, and editing all part of one ‘producer’ position’s responsibilities.

So, by not competing with the plethora of jobseekers all applying for the same opportunities in New York, I become a unique entity in different countries, where my alternative background stood out so much so that the employers valued and respected my breaking away from the status quo and taking on all of the challenges of being a foreign entity.

Throughout this journey, I’ve learned a lot about myself and what I was capable of achieving through persistence, determination, and revelations about my character’s arc and transformation.

My lesson learned is that anyone can step outside of their boundaries and find a way to live and work in a new country once you set your mind to it. It’s not as difficult as it is portrayed to be, and creativity can come from confronting challenges that you never thought could be overcome in the first place. Quite often, character is built within the journey, more so than the destination.

Oh, and that childhood awe of having my name in the movie credits still rolls on in Act III ...