

More Than Just Mouthwash

"I thought I was mostly going to do theatre," says Megan Raye Manzi, who earned a theatre degree from Boston's Emerson College. But theatre soon started to feel limiting. "I realized there are only so many things you can do without an agent," she says. "Even when I joined Equity, it was hard as a union member to do things that are in New York, because most of the things that are being cast are summer stock or things like that—which is great, but I wanted to move forward, and I wanted to get an agent." After meeting agents by doing print work, "I realized some of the agencies also had a commercials department. So I thought, Now that I'm in print and it's fun, maybe commercials would be fun too."

So Manzi enrolled in on-camera and commercial acting classes at Weist-Barron in New York—though the latter class was merely to appease an agent who'd recommended it. "I've learned so much, especially in the commercials class, much to my surprise," she says. "I thought, I'm a good actress; I'm a trained actress. How hard can it be to talk to the camera? Then I saw myself on film and thought, Omigosh! I look like I'm just talking to the camera—and it's awful. So it was really eye-opening in the commercials class to see myself and to see how it's such a funny medium. I was just learning how to ignore the camera from doing a few independent films. Now I have to acknowledge the camera but not look like a zombie talking straight to it."

"Commercial actors have to be in touch with what they're sharing and really say it truthfully without thinking that everyone is understanding them just because it's in English," says Jerry Doyle, a seasoned stage actor who has directed the commercials division at Weist-Barron for 30 years. If an actor is not being honest, he adds, viewers will pick up on that instantaneously: "Commercials today are extremely natural, extremely conversational."

The All-Seeing Lens

No matter how versatile you may be, an on-camera class can help you gain a level of comfort in front of the camera, says Peter Miner, who teaches film and TV acting at Weist-Barron and T. Schreiber Studio. This especially applies to stage actors trained to project to the back of the house—not just vocally but physically. Like *Big Brother* in George Orwell's 1984, the camera sees everything.

"It may not take very much," says Miner of on-camera training. "It depends on how easy it is for the actor to adjust. There are people who are just a little bit bigger than life. For them it's more difficult. The only thing is, when you gear down, you should not bring the energy down. You're just bringing [the voice] down to realistic speech level, but the energy remains the same."

Wanting to master the nuances of film and TV acting, Courtney Cook enrolled in the New York Conservatory for Dramatic Arts School of Film and Television, a full-time two-year program. A graduate of a performing arts high school in Pennsylvania, Cook has

considerable stage experience, but to break into on-camera work she knew she would need different skills.

"Theatre gives you so much freedom," she says. "When you act on camera, it's extremely technical. You have to have the same emotional range each time you film. Technically, you have to be conscious of what you're doing with your body at all times, so that you can match that in each shot when you have to do the same scene six times in about six different camera angles—they have to match perfectly. Camera acting is extremely subtle. You don't want to do too big of a movement, because they read about a hundred times bigger on screen."

This tenet of on-camera acting is something Doug Warhit, an L.A.-based acting coach who offers private and group sessions, tries to instill in his students, who range from beginners to working pros. "All of the classes I do every week are videotaped," he says. "The work goes on camera and so does the critique. And you take the tape home."

Simulating Production

Even for performers with on-camera experience—like Brad Snedeker, an SFT graduate whose TV credits include *Reba* and *ER*—on-camera classes are a good way "to keep your skills sharp, especially during slow seasons such as the recent writers strike," he says. "You want to be doing something to keep up-to-date." He's been studying with Warhit for five years, usually in scene study, a class whose goal is not so much teaching you how to act on camera, Snedeker says, "but to get [you] comfortable with cameras in front of you. It's one thing to get up on stage—where you know the entire audience is out there, but it's dark and you can hardly see them—as opposed to when I was working on *Reba*, a four-camera show, and I had cameras literally a foot away from me."

Curiosity impelled Robert Grant to take Danton Stone's eight-week on-camera scene-study class at the William Esper Studio in New York. Grant, who once trained as a dancer at NYU, recently completed the two-year program at Esper, but it did not include on-camera training. "Everything that Bill gave us was activities, exercises—all the work was done in the classroom without a camera," he says. Currently midway through the course, Grant says he and his classmates are working very simply: "Right now we're really focusing on just finding specific moments, and we've just been assigned scenes. It's been a real acting opportunity to see myself on film."

A process of a different sort occurs in Eric Kline's on-camera classes at the Film Actors Workshop in L.A. "We work by taking scenes from motion pictures primarily through a cycle of cold readings, rehearsing, and then recording in a three-camera video studio," he says. "And then we take the DVDs that result from that, play it back, and critique them. It's as much like a production process as we can create within a context of a class." Kline emphasizes listening, "since that involves so many problems onscreen. That's your first obligation as an actor: to be present when you're able to act."

Miner, who spent 20 years directing the ABC soap *One Life to Live* (for which he won two Emmys) and who also teaches student directors in Columbia University's graduate film division, concurs. All good on-camera acting is about reacting, he says: "That's the big

difference between film and stage. On stage, we tend to watch the person talking and taking action. In film, very often the scene is about the person listening."

Soaps and Sitcoms

What about a genre such as daytime drama, in which human behavior is often pitched to the extreme? Miner says soap acting is more presentational than other forms of on-camera work: "Everything is so dramatic. And what you as an actor have to do in order for this not to be false is that you really have to push your needs. You just have to want things more than other people in the world want them."

In addition to their stylistic demands, soaps often require the principal performers to memorize 40 to 50 pages of dialogue a day and then shoot without rehearsal. "I think [it's] the toughest job, because they shoot so many pages a day and they never go on hiatus," says Jay Goldenberg, who teaches on-camera scene study at SFT and serves as the school's associate artistic director. "It's so fast. Also, in soap opera you're maybe using four or five cameras at a time. It's kind of dive in and swim as quickly as you can."

Goldenberg believes that good on-camera acting translates across genres, but "if you're an actor who has trouble making adjustments easily, I would take a class and find out what the different genres are about," he says. "If you walk onto a set for the first time, it's going to be overwhelming, but you'll have an idea of who all these people are and what's required of you. Classes will help you a lot to focus on your job and when your job is supposed to be done and when to hold back on your energy and when to give to your energy."

Unlike theatre, sitcoms don't offer the luxury of weeks of rehearsal, but they can be a good fit for stage actors seeking an entrée into on-camera work. "In the traditional sitcom, such as *Everybody Loves Raymond*, it's done a lot like a play," says Goldenberg. "You get your script, and then you rehearse it for four days, and then you shoot on the fifth day. Some of those shows shoot in front of a live audience with four cameras rolling at the same time, so you don't have to do it over and over again like [you would] in film for a single shot or a close-up or for a two-shot."

The other type of sitcom, such as *My Name Is Earl*, is shot like a prime-time drama, with a single camera and no rehearsal. But unlike a feature film—where a larger budget and longer shooting schedule may allow a director to do multiple takes—a single-camera sitcom demands that actors get it right the first time.

The Intimacy of Film

Film is the most intimate—and most individual—of the on-camera media. "You kind of know how a soap opera is going to be shot and how a sitcom is going to be shot, but with a film it's totally up to the director," says Goldenberg. "Some directors like to do a scene in a couple of takes, while others will make you do 50 takes, so you as an actor have to adjust to the style of the director."

The many technical aspects of acting in film drove actor Anthony Bradford to enroll in an on-camera class with Greg Levins at the New York Film Academy. "I didn't have too much on-

camera experience before that," Bradford says. "The class gave me a lot of confidence for auditions. It was a catalyst for me. The next thing I knew, I was landing roles in student films and even have some independent projects on the way."

But is it possible to be a successful screen actor without taking on-camera classes? "I actually think it would probably be easier for someone who has never acted before to go right into it, because you don't have that theatre background," says Cook. Snedeker, however, isn't convinced. Classes, he says, are "a good tool to get yourself familiarized with the camera, so when you walk into an audition you'll know what to expect."

Bob Goodman, who teaches an on-camera acting workshop at NYFA, feels there are obstacles an actor needs to overcome when transitioning to film. It's a matter of remaining engaged and retaining energy while learning "to modulate a performance to fit a frame," he says. He advises finding an acting technique—Meisner, Stanislavsky, Adler, etc.—that works for you, because films are often shot without rehearsal, making preparation paramount.

What differentiates his workshop from other film acting courses is on-set experience, Goodman says: "We do contemporary film scenes, we go on location, and the class is the crew." When they're not acting, the students divvy up the tasks—such as continuity and camera operator—and at the end of the course they receive a DVD of the finished project. "We prepare the students and teach them how to prepare," he says.

"On-camera classes help you in being prepared, either in auditioning for film or on set," agrees actor Bryan Kaplan, who has studied on-camera acting at the Penny Templeton Studio in New York City. In both situations, "things are happening quickly, so you have to come with a plan," he says. "In the class, they help you understand what the blocking is for—because of the technical requirements—and how it helps fill the screen. This way, when you're on set, you can do the scene quickly. Another thing I learned is how to use your eyes. If you don't use your eyes and look up, you may as well be on talk radio. Also how to handle props, eating, drinking—which is super important because of continuity. You have to remember which props you used, so the editor can match the different shots. You can have a great scene, but if the shots can't be matched, they can't use it."

Preparation is important in any medium, but particularly in TV and film, so learning all you can about the techniques and requirements of working on camera can only help you get ready for your close-up.