

Caught in the Act: Actors Acting Reviewed By Valerie Porter of Bookpleasures.com

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Gift-shopping for an entertainment fan? Look no more. Want to indulge in a special treat for yourself? Done. There couldn't be a more perfect item than the lavish, fascinating coffee-table book "Caught in the Act: Actors Acting."

The creative team behind the book is impressive: internationally-acclaimed, award-winning photographer Howard Schatz, public television news and documentary producer Beverly J. Ornstein, and Owen Edwards, whose writing credits include Vogue, GQ, Town & Country and New York Times Magazine.

They have asked 85 celebrities ("shape-shifters" they call them) to discuss their craft and share an intimate side of themselves mentally, physically and emotionally. The celebrity selection includes a wide range of eras and experience: Brooke Shields, Mischa Barton, Colin Firth, Mariska Hargitay, Tyne Daly, Ricky Gervais, David Schwimmer, Jane Lynch and Kathleen Turner are but a few.

The book is a celebration of actors and acting, allowing performers to recall in great detail how they became actors, what inspires and motivates them, and many other insights into their personal feelings about their profession.

We have Laurence Fishburne saying, "I always say that acting picked me. I didn't pick acting. I always wanted to be a doctor..."

Jane Lynch, on the other hand, says with her typical wit: "Theater was the one thing in my life that I knew I wanted to do immediately. I don't remember when it hit me. It was like a pre-existing condition..." Robin Wright enthusiastically reveals: "I get to play. I finally feel that – as a kid would when they wake up – are we going to play? That's what it feels like every day."

The joy of acting is a common theme. Allison Janney comments, "I find that I'm too self-conscious in my real life; I wish I could just speak and have wonderful things come out, but I doubt myself and second-guess, and there's something about being in a play or having a script and memorizing. I have someone else's words to say, and it's freeing to me."

Many people are aware of the acting exercise where actors are given an emotion and asked to instantly portray it. It's not popular with some performers because there is no "back story" provided – nothing to give any hint of characterization. But in this book, the actors are given more to work with. Situations were suggested, many of them outlandish or emotionally-charged. Improvisation exercises were done, and the results are amazing. Gone are any worries of what they'll look like – how angry or silly – they just, as with any good actor, "go for it."

What's different about this book as opposed to other celebrity photography books or even photography/commentary books, is the combination of elements. There's a portrait of each actor in addition to their improvisation photos. Don't necessarily expect glamour shots. These are soul-baring, pore-exposed, scar-exposed, up-close-and-personal black and white or color shots. This isn't to say the images aren't beautiful in their own way, because the actor becomes very human – very real. It speaks volumes of the trust and openness during the photo shoot.

Among the suggestions given, Sissy Spacek was told: "You're a woman in your 18th hour of labor, screaming at your husband that he'd better never touch you again."

All of John Malkovich's reaction poses are like a master class in acting. One of the most chilling is his instant characterization to: "You're an icy interrogator telling a captive that in exactly 60 seconds, if you don't get the information you need, you're going to start removing body parts, starting with his ears." Among the stars unafraid to let their talent override their concern for facial appearance are Geoffrey Rush and Pierce Brosnan. The goofy look on Rush's face in response to: "You're a teenager who picked up the telephone extension, hearing your mother having phone sex", is priceless.

Pierce Brosnan gives a perfectly ironic and silly response to: "You're a presidential candidate at a meet-and-greet, shaking hands with a millionaire you know is bankrolling your opponent; you hate his guts, but you don't dare alienate him."

One of the best situational poses in the book (because of her association with "The View") comes from Whoopi Goldberg, in reaction to the suggestion: "You're Barbara Walters interviewing a recently divorced actress about her latest movie, suddenly going for the jugular with, 'Did it hurt more that he left you for a younger woman?'"

Some actors used props for their photo shoots. Jeff Goldblum used glasses and a hat in many creative ways to help portray a character. Elizabeth Moss changed clothes entirely for her characterizations.

Some used nothing at all. Just a hint of tears from Michael Douglas and Sir Ben Kingsley spoke volumes about their situations and their talent.

This is a book to be savored slowly. The photos, the words, the sheer joy and fascination in seeing these professionals at work are an experience not to be missed.

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