

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

James Morrison: 'Treat Everyone as a Collaborator'

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We caught up with [James Morrison](#), whom you may know as Bill Buchanan in *24*, and whom you've seen in dozens of roles in movies such as *Jarhead* and television series like *Revenge*. The actor-writer-director-musician-filmmaker-yogi was in the middle of rehearsing with his band. They'll soon be playing live in Southern California to support James' first album, *Son to the Boy*. Between sessions he's also working to complete the final DVD of his documentary about the audition process, *Showing Up*.

Focus is a big issue for so many creative people – we're presented with myriad opportunities and possibilities, and it's hard to say 'No.' But you seem to have mastered it: you act, direct, write (films, plays, poems), compose music, teach yoga, have a social media presence. What's your secret? Really – how do you schedule your time so efficiently?

Truthfully, I'm not as focused as I'd like to be. A friend and teacher commented recently that she loves my use of social networking but then cautioned me with, "I hope it's not keeping you from writing the great American novel." I knew what she meant and she's right. I have a book to write and I'm not writing it right now. Being connected to the outside world, no matter how we chose to do it, can be a distraction. I enjoy the give and take but also fall victim to the time-sucking aspects of it. I justify it by making it creative – perhaps I'll craft a joke in 140 characters or shift a Haiku over to my songs-in-progress file but it's really a way to make it appear, to myself, as a "creative" endeavor. I think we all have to be careful of those kinds of distractions and justifications.

What I have to be especially mindful of is acknowledging the voice that tells me to go to work. I guess what I'm really saying is that I'm trying harder to be aware of distractions when I feel them happening. And awareness is more than half the battle, isn't it?

I sometimes tell creative people and entrepreneurs that "work is like yoga." You're a yoga master. Do you find that acting is like yoga?

Simply put, I think everything is yoga and yoga is everything. When I discovered there is no "on/off switch" to my yoga practice – that nothing would be created without the union of opposites that is yoga – the world became a more hospitable place for me. I remember hearing all my life that we should find one thing, one discipline or course of study, apply ourselves to the task of mastering it, and anything else is a distraction from that goal. All our learning should be focused on that one field of study. Even before I was able to feel that I am cross-disciplinary, if you will, that felt false to me. It felt limiting, and sort of a cop-out, really. It was another way to keep us – and I've always had a problem with this, all through school – from achieving our potential or recognizing the possibilities of life. Worst of all, it keeps us from learning about ourselves.

In other words, there is no state where my work begins and my yoga practice ends, and vice-versa. Everything I do informs everything else I do, in order, hopefully, to find balance and harmony and possibility, and that is as it should be, I think.

You've been working on a documentary about the audition process, called *Showing Up*. It has more than 60 interviews with actors about how they approach and experience auditions. Are there some common themes?

Yes, I've narrowed it down to two: 1) We are not alone. The comfort of knowing that there are others who feel the same way we feel is incredibly empowering. And 2) Treat everyone as a collaborator, not an adversary. No one is actually standing between you and what you want to achieve or accomplish unless you put them there. In fact, quite the opposite is true: The ones who matter want us to succeed.

Now, these are the two that come to mind right now. I'll probably change my mind tomorrow.

We're in an election year, which means the American people are sitting on the other side of the audition table: Obama and Romney are auditioning for the role of President. From an actor's standpoint, how is each one approaching his audition? How should we Americans go about casting that role?

I always cast the ensemble players, the ones who know what the greater good is and puts serving that before their own ambitions. The ones who realize the story is the most important thing. I'm always more impressed by intelligence and thoroughness, authenticity and compassion toward every character no matter how large their role might be. I watch them interact with the extras and the crew members on the set – are they condescending, are they dismissive of their contribution? Are they considerate and, without compromising their sense of obligation to the story, deliberately authentic in their dealings with their collaborators? Are they moody, temperamental? Would we, as Jack O'Brien says in *Showing Up*, "want to have dinner with them?"

Are they all about creating drama, playing to the basest fears; are they aggressive, looking for conflict where there is none? Are they passive-aggressive and manipulative? Do you want them to save you from yourself because you are afraid or do you want them to empower you to tell the story your capable of telling without them? Do you want them to show you how you can be self-reliant yet be aware that some aren't and need help and nurturing? Are they aware of how important the environment is, how we are stewards of that environment for the next generation? What kind of people are they going to bring with them, what kind of business have they done in the past? All these questions are valid no matter who you're choosing as a collaborator or what the project is.

But in terms of what I think the American people should be aware of when casting that role of President is the lesson I learned from my mother called the Golden Rule. Do they follow it and teach it? Do they treat the other person as they would be treated when there is nothing in it for them? In other words, are they kind to all people they meet and do they look out for those who need looking after when it's not politically expedient and even when it might be a liability to do so? That's how I judge people, politicians or not. Like my acting teacher, Harry Mastrogeorge says, "An actor's imagination is limited, a human beings is not. Which would you rather be?" Substitute politician for actor and compassion for imagination and I think you'll see how I feel about who should be elected.

If you were going to play the President (a role you'd be kind of great for), how would you approach the part? And would you bring your guitar?

I would approach it the same way I approach any role: studying the script, reading anything I could that pertained to its circumstances and conditions. Hopefully the role would call for me to have the qualities I described in the answer to the previous question, but if it didn't, I would do my best to approach playing the villain without judgment.

And yes, I'd bring my guitar. And my Woody Guthrie and Bob Dylan songbooks.

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