

***Roadblocks in Acting*****by Rob Roznowski**

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*Reviewed by Dennis Schebetta*

In *Roadblocks in Acting*, Roznowski has created a self-described “self-help” book to aid actors, directors, and teachers navigate the psychological rigors of the craft. Although actors receive training in technique, they rarely learn strategies on how to engage in emotionally high-charged imaginary circumstances in a healthy way, and instructors are often unconcerned or unequipped with tools to assist or nurture mental and psychological well-being. The book’s goal is to use standardized assessments and practical exercises to identify, address, and overcome roadblocks, what Roznowski identifies as “self-imposed barriers to holistic embodied acting on stage or on camera” (1) so that actors can reach “peak performance” in a healthy way. These roadblocks are not skill-based or physical-based techniques, but an “emotionally triggered hindrance” that inhibits the freedom of the actor’s work (2). In particular, the book’s aim is to address actors who play it safe by making the same choices over and over again, or avoid emotionally charged material, or feel they are holding themselves back in some mysterious way. However, the book delivers much more than its promise, providing an insightful, well-researched overview of the psychological aspects of the profession. In addition, it could even serve as a much-needed guidebook on ethics in the classroom, giving students and educators the knowledge and tools to understand the psychological dimensions of actor training.

Roznowski draws on his many years of experience teaching as Associate Professor and Head of Acting and Directing at Michigan State University. Like many professors, he observed highly-skilled students struggling to achieve artistic excellence and finding freedom in their work, not because of training or effort, but some other unknown block (1). Roznowski enlisted the aid of four psychologists to help him to identify and address these blocks in an effort to create

a “bridge” (2) to overcome them. These four psychologists were familiar with acting and its relation to psychology, neuroscience, and cognitive science. Roznowski explored these ideas with over a hundred graduate and undergraduate students. In addition to transcripts and quotes from these sources, Roznowski refers to a range of research and recent studies, such as those by Rhonda Blair (*The Actor, Image, and Acting: Acting and Cognitive Neuroscience*) and Rick Kemp (*Embodied Acting: What Neuroscience Tells Us About Performance*), plus examples from *The Australian Actors’ Wellbeing Study* conducted by doctors working with the Australian actors union. Going beyond theory and scientific data, Roznowski has successfully clarified these ideas for the layperson and applied them to hands-on exercises. For example, he modifies Mel Shapiro’s well-known autodrama exercise and applies that to his concepts, effectively theatricalizing the roadblock to investigate it and thus become free of it. Another helpful tool borrowed from the expert consultants is the use of third-person writing and self-talk within the audition and rehearsal process, as well as in performance, to create emotional safety and to reduce anxiety. The book is geared toward actors who have acquired technique and have already begun working on their craft, as well as their directors, coaches, and teachers, although beginning actors could also benefit.

The introduction and first chapter define the term roadblock and how each is a unique personal issue. They also address the dynamics of the unspoken power structures of an acting class. In particular, there is a detailed example from an actor struggling with an emotional moment in a production, with commentary from both actor and director, as well as the psychological reasons that particular roadblock may have manifested. Roznowski asserts immediately and throughout the book that acting should not be used in place of therapy, and that acting teachers are not therapists, mentioning when professional assistance might be necessary. Chapter 2, “Understanding Your Self,” introduces concepts from neuroscience and psychology, providing self-analysis exercises. Actors analyze their emotional or psychological reasons for choosing the profession, and

then identify how this might influence certain choices, especially if those choices are habits of safety that limit potential. Roznowski treads some uneasy territory here, at one level proclaiming that “each person’s journey is unique” (25), so the reasons for which an actor chooses the profession can vary. But he also posits that there are two primary psychological motives to fill an “emotional void”—either “they like attention” or “they do it lose their self, to hide” (25). Roznowski admits this is a reductionist oversimplification, but the categories allow for quick identification of an actor’s approach. If, as an actor, you disagree with the statement, you may well have issues with his further arguments about the personal and professional overlap of the actor’s work. However, the author defuses the idea of two basic needs for pursuing acting by relating his own reluctance to diminish his reasons for acting. This awareness then led to a recognition of his own need for deep honesty, realizing that the idea of fulfilling an emotional need is “not a judgment but a practical provocation to deeper examination of self related to art” (26).

The author expands further on these two classifications and emotional choices in Chapter 3, “Understanding Your Other Selves,” as these psychological concepts of the self affect how actors have multiple selves: professional, personal, and character. These selves merge and overlap and the first step is to examine the personal self, using standardized assessment tests, tools from the realm of psychology such as the Big-Five and the Five Factor Model, and testing levels of introvert/extrovert. The Big-Five is a psychological personality test which examines “five broad areas or traits including extroversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism and openness to experience” (41). After taking the Big-Five once, the exercises then lead the actor through the various selves, taking the test as the “actor self” and as characters that he or she has played in the past. Following that, the introvert/extrovert test analyzes the actor’s different selves as well. Here, Roznowski relates research that illuminates personality types who may be shy personally, and yet perform freely as actors, making choices that would otherwise belong to an extrovert. While

many actors may be familiar with self-analysis or character biography exercises, these standardized tests are more specific, allowing an actor to clearly see how each self is different and juggled in various ways, consciously or unconsciously, in rehearsal, on stage, or backstage. Using scientific data, Roznowski illuminates how actors have unique stressors, with clear evidence that this work takes a toll physically, mentally, and psychologically. These stress factors can also lead to blocks in the actor's process.

The next few chapters identify various roadblocks, and then provide practical exercises to overcome them. Roznowski uses various examples from students and professional actors to show how roadblocks unveil themselves through safety behaviors which may manifest as areas of physical tension, a nervous tic, avoiding eye contact, tugging at clothes, physical discomfort, or vocal qualities. Other noticeable behaviors might include using humor to avoid intimacy or over-critical judgment. Roznowski then introduces strategies for working with this information, such as Acceptance Commitment Therapy (ACT) which is a theory of non-judgmental awareness or "a tangible way in which actors may begin to examine their work more objectively" (68). Actors become aware of an issue, accept it, and embrace it as part of that present moment. ACT "reminds you this is only a temporary state of being" (68). The author then gives concrete examples of actors working through such blocks as using intelligence to avoid empathy, a fear of looking foolish, and feeling self-conscious about height. Chapter 6, "Addressing Roadblocks," delves into a series of sequential exercises designed for both actors and acting teachers to use as methods to address blocks. Examples of these exercises are changing the tempo of a scene, exaggerating the roadblock, physicalizing or vocalizing the roadblock, inner monologue exercises, and meditation. The author expands further on manifestation of roadblocks, and deeply explains further issues including anxiety, body awareness, emotion, hiding, intimacy, judgment, power, and self-esteem. The final issue, vulnerability, is described as the "meta" roadblock, underlying all other issues. The ability to be vulnerable

is described early in the book as one of three adjectives that define successful acting (the other two are *adept* and *skilled*). Roznowski defines vulnerability as “compassionate understanding of a character in combination with an empathetic ability to explore emotional territory required by the script” (5). Many actors may have their own definition so it’s important that actors understand what they are striving for and why, and not push emotion for its own sake or pretend to be vulnerable even though they’re not. Here, the author cautions against “too much vulnerability” (162) and states that normalizing vulnerability can be an anxiety-filled journey. According to Roznowski, success seems also to lie in “small moments of vulnerability” (165), and by scaffolding in small amounts, students can attain their desired vulnerability over time. The final two chapters emphasize the need for repetition and practice to build bridges to overcome barriers, in order both to enjoy excellence and to experience the mindfulness that results from peak performance.

The strength of this book is that it can be used individually as a self-help guide to examine one’s work, but also in a classroom setting. The examples and excerpts from previous students are helpful and specific, with common issues that many students face (e.g., fear of intimacy, emotional blocks, stage fright). What is particularly helpful is that Roznowski provides many resources for the reader to learn more about the concepts and theories addressed. The author also admits that since these concepts derive from the areas of psychology and neuroscience, the strategies are particularly well suited to a Stanislavski-based training. He briefly mentions other styles of performance such as Shakespeare, musical theater, Commedia, and mask, but spends limited time detailing how to apply these exercises to other styles. He does suggest and encourage modifications, however, and provides a few examples, so it would be easy enough for a specialist in these styles to adapt the book’s ideas.

This insightful and inspiring book clearly hits the mark in its aim to give tools to actors who keep making the same choices over

and over again or for those who want to push themselves out of their comfort zones into highly-charged performances. For those willing to dive into the exercises honestly, it is a true actor's guide in self-discovery and self-awareness, offering useful psychological concepts to develop the actor's instrument in a healthy way. If you are an acting teacher, director, or coach, you will find it invaluable in aiding students to overcome their blocks.

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