

AN INTERVIEW WITH PETER GOLDFARB



Peter Goldfarb is an internationally known producer, director and actor. He produced and/or directed over 30 films for NBC's Experiment in Television, and has received several Emmy nominations, including one for his production of Federico Fellini's first made-for-TV film, *Fellini—A Director's Notebook*. In 1990 he produced and directed the World Premiere of the newly revised version of *Hair*. Peter has taught at the Lee Strasberg Theatre Institute in Los Angeles and New York, the Actor's Studio, Circle in the Square, the Young Filmmakers Foundation, and many others, and has led workshops in Paris, Rome, London, Bucharest, Kathmandu, and all over the world. He is a founding faculty member and Trustee of Naropa University, which recently established the Peter Goldfarb Institute for Advanced Theater Studies. Peter is the recipient of the 1996 Best Actor award from Drama-Logue, and a 1997 Helen Hayes Award nominee for Outstanding Performer.

WHJ: You emphasize authenticity in your teaching approach with actors. Yet on the surface, it would seem that the best actor is one that most successfully convinces the audience that they are *not* themselves. What does it mean to be authentically yourself while becoming a character?

PETER: There's a paradox there. I would define authenticity as "being true to your own experience." I'm interested in the ability of each creative individual to maximize their awareness and acknowledgment of their experience and their creative resources, moment to moment. We each have a library of experience and emotions, and we want to expand that library as much as we can. To give a converse example, if I have a problem with my anger and I have shelved that part of myself, then it's not easy for me to access anger, should it be called for if I'm playing a particular role. So then I wind up faking it. And acting is not faking it. If, however, I have resolved that issue and I'm able to connect easily with my anger, or sadness, then that becomes available to me as a creative tool.

Theater and the authenticity

One of my favorite theater stories is about the guy who comes back from a rehearsal and says to his wife, "Honey, I've got it, I've got it! I found out the secret to being a great actor." And she says, "Well tell me, tell me, what is it?" "The secret to being a great actor," he replies, "is total sincerity. Now if I could only learn to fake that, I've got it made."

So authenticity is not an idea, not a method or a technique—it's a question of being *ourselves*. And we're not talking about "self" from a Western point of view, which can be very much an *obstacle* to being a truly creative human being. Because in the West the self is some kind of solidified persona—that I *am* this way: I *don't* like cabbage, I *do* like chocolate ice cream...this is the "way I am!" It should be fairly clear what an obstacle this can be to being a free ranging and liberated creative person. More appropriately, from the Buddhist or Eastern point of view, the Self is this kind of loose connection of all different kinds of elements that are constantly changing from moment to moment.

WHJ: What you said is somewhat reminiscent of Method Acting—isn't that looking into your own experience to bring it forth into the character?

PETER: Well, in Method Acting there's something called "emotional recall," or in Stanislavsky it's known as "sense memory." However, there can't be emotional recall and/or sense memory if the emotion is blocked somewhere in the past. You may think you are recalling the emotion or "behaving as though," but I'm more interested in the availability in the present tense—there's no need to go anyplace to try and dredge something up. If there is unfinished business from the past, it unfailingly informs our *present tense* experience and that's where I prefer to deal with it because the past is past and, as Fritz Perls said, "memory is a lie." When the energy or emotion is liberated in the present it becomes available as a creative resource.

WHJ: For most of us, to gain that sort of access to blocked emotional energies requires some pretty intensive psychological/therapeutic or spiritual work. How do you approach it in an acting class?

PETER: I approach it more from an energetic point of view—I prefer that rather than talking about the psychological—we don't particularly need the psychological. Certainly from the Gestalt point of view, which is the ground of a lot of my work, if there is unfinished business in the past, sooner or later it will manifest itself. So if I work with that unfinished business, through Gestalt perhaps, that can help to resolve the situation and liberate whatever the disowned feelings are, to allow that energy to be available in the present.

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WHJ: So do you go that route in an acting workshop?

PETER: A priori, no. If that was appropriate in terms of what was happening, then yes I would...I guess! But I never know, because there's no plan, it's what the participants are presenting in any given moment. When I'm doing dream-work, then the likelihood is yes, I would utilize that approach—but it's all in the service of liberating those energies. Which is somewhat different from therapy. Certainly the results may be therapeutic, but I'm really focussed on the creative aspect.

WHJ: How does it impact people?

PETER: The work is transformational. If people begin to have an experience of their authentic beings, that in itself is transformational. One of the issues I'm dealing with is this tendency to create external models: models of excellence to aspire to, or live up to. This, to me, is disempowering rather than empowering. It takes us further away from ourselves, from the fact that who and what I am is enough. No, I have to learn how to walk properly, to speak properly, and on and on. Whereas, in connecting with our authentic experience, there's a natural movement, a natural speech that occurs. So I don't teach any technique.

Peter Goldfarb as Tevye in *Fiddler on the Roof* ❦

WHJ: So how are you in approaching the work in the absence of technique?

PETER: I work with people's present tense experience...

WHJ: In the context of them doing a scene?

PETER: No, with different kinds of exercises, all of which facilitate a sort of direct connection, bypassing the cerebral, bypassing the notions of "acting" and doing something well or not well. For example, I do a guided fantasy that I call the "gender-bender," in which people imagine themselves as members of the opposite sex...and when they come back and begin to enact it and speak as those characters, there is this totally direct connection. They uncannily wind up knowing almost everything there is to know about these characters. The same is true with becoming various objects and then speaking as the object. There's no gap between the person and what or who it is they are portraying. And if we are 100% coming from our experience, the issue of being good or not good is irrelevant. This begins to point the way



towards a completely different paradigm for approaching theater, the creation of a character, performance, etc. Although I never limit my groups to aspiring performers—they are for anybody interested in the creative process. I've had groups with no actors.

WHJ: So this is equally about how to be in life as on the stage.

PETER: Well, hopefully. One of the challenges for me is to live a life which is commensurate and in harmony with what I teach, and that has not always been the case.

WHJ: Are they coming together?

PETER: Yes—the gap is narrowing. I think I can say that.

WHJ: I read an intriguing statement you made, distinguishing between a performer's possibly neurotic, ego-driven desire to be seen, versus *allowing* oneself to be seen in such a way that it becomes an expression of generosity—can you elaborate on that a bit?

PETER: When I was younger and faced with the decision of whether or not to continue performing, the models and examples I saw out there seemed to have something to do with “showing oneself” or being “presentational.” And that didn't feel right, that felt sort of awkward, as if there was some sort of obligation for me to kind of show-off. And I assiduously avoided acting for many, many years, and did everything else but. Until I finally came to understand that, at least for me, it was exactly the opposite of “building yourself up” or “puffing yourself up” or “strutting the stage.” It was much more a kind of willingness, to be open and vulnerable, and a fantastic opportunity to manifest generosity.

Because acting is *giving*. You have an opportunity to give of yourself and to touch people's lives, particularly in the theater, where there is immediate feedback and an incredible give and take. This is a beautiful, beautiful thing, and I don't know many other ways as good as this, to be honestly able to reach people. There are plenty of dysfunctional examples of giving, like giving in order to get back, or to be seen as giving, or a sort of showy, misinterpretation of Christian charity. And so to experience for oneself an example of pure

generosity is to finally get, “Oh, this is what giving means.” It's tricky, because habitually and traditionally, there are primarily ego models surrounding the performer and acting. But in fact it isn't that at all. Probably the most gifted actors are the ones who plug into that genuine place of giving.

WHJ: Who are some of your favorites?

PETER: There are two kind of actors. The kind whose personality fundamentally remains the same from role to role, and the transformational actor, who really does seem different each time. From that point of view, Meryl Streep is very high on my list, DeNiro, Olivier...in other forms, one of my great heroes was Maria Callas. She had that ability to so immerse herself that she completely transformed—the way she looked physically, the quality of her voice. On her recording of *Madame Butterfly*, she sounds like an eighteen year old girl; listen to her in *Parsifal*, she's an ancient, aging sorceress. Really uncanny. She's a prime example.

WHJ: But to be clear about the paradox you spoke of at the start, when you say they're able to transform themselves, that also includes tapping into who they are?

PETER: I think that that *is* the way they transform themselves. They don't do it through imitation. It's because the range that is available to them of their creative resources is so vast that they're able to plug in to that universal library of experience, and that even transcends one's own personal history. I was in rehearsal for *The Dresser*, playing the part that Albert Finney played in the movie. As always I reached a point where I was getting really freaked out. I called up a close friend of mine who's also a teacher and director, and I said, “I don't know why I'm doing this. I'm not English, I'm younger than the character, I've never toured the provinces

of England, I haven't had any of the experiences of the character." And she, referring to the fact that I had recently played Claudius in *Hamlet*, said, "Darling, you've never been the King of Denmark either." And she just cut through that whole thing.

So we just plug in—we have universes inside ourselves that are available for us to tap, but very often our culture or society is set up in such a way that from the very beginning, we are weaned away from access to those universes. We are trained to be a good child and to behave properly, and the educational system often emphasizes memorizing things rather than imparting a true sense of learning and knowledge. Of course there are exceptions, and we notice them—we always remember those great teachers that really infused us with the joy of the light of learning. But usually education is about "Study pages such and such so you can take this quiz." There's so much built-in disempowerment in our society it's appalling, and it's the root of so much neurosis and dysfunctionality, because then one finds oneself desperately grasping for some sense of empowerment or acknowledgment. So, you might say that this is an effort to redress some of that imbalance. There's an inherent logic—if we have so much already within ourselves perhaps we don't have to go out there to find it. The habitual paradigm is, "I'm inadequate within myself, I have to get what I need out there."

WHJ: That brings us to the various ways of finding "what's in there," and one of them for you has been Buddhism and meditation practice. How does Buddhism inform your work and approach to theater.

PETER: When I remember not to get trapped, and not to become a prisoner of my fears, my hesitations and so on, the training that I've received of not rejecting whatever is there—but rather, leaning into it, embracing it, acknowledging it—is the principle thing that has served me. When I remember to do so. But I'm a human being, I'm not enlightened, so I don't always remember. And that's what I encourage in students—to embrace whatever comes up. It's all valuable, it's all, as Trungpa Rinpoche used to say, fertilizer.

When I was doing Tevye in *Fiddler on the Roof*, I had to do some matinees for kids at 9:30 in the morning. And my thought was, "Oh my God, how am I ever going to get through this, it's going to be exhausting, I have another performance tonight, maybe I should preserve my energy." But the way I got through it was being honest to my fatigue. If I had tried to overcome my tiredness, I probably would have given a lousy performance and certainly, at the very least, I would have been very uncomfortable.

WHJ: So you played a tired Tevye?

PETER: Yes, and somehow out of that tiredness and exhaustion came a certain energy. Because I was in touch with myself as I was doing it, and not fighting my truth. I some-

times put such pressure on myself to be different than I am! It's the curse of that Judeo-Christian work ethic of achievement—or certainly how we came to interpret it.

WHJ: To change the subject, you once said "Everybody has a practice." What did you mean?

PETER: That's a good one. You know, everybody is practicing something. Some people practice meditation or yoga, some people practice screwing other people, some people continually practice their neurotic patterns, over and over again. So it's helpful to realize we're all practicing something, and it's a question of how appropriate those practices are.

WHJ: Have you distilled for yourself what it is you're practicing?

PETER: Gosh...I think it changes. Sometimes I practice stubbornness, sometimes I practice open-heartedness, or being hard on myself, and sometimes I practice letting go. I'm not sure I have a consistent practice, unless it's inconsistency!

WHJ: Although if you look through your career, there definitely seems to be a through line.

PETER: I guess so—but I tend *not* to look through my career! I mean someone at NBC once pointed out to me the thematic consistency of the programs that I had created, all of which seemed to have something to do with the individual search. But we have a tendency to have amnesia about our past, other than when we're dwelling on it and lamenting it. But most often we tend to conveniently exclude certain things from our memory. It's another one of the problems that exists in our culture—an absence of historical perspective. You don't find that in Europe, where people have more of a sense of where they came from. I believe that we suffer from that a lot—not having a clear sense of our real roots, our history and so on. One way it manifests is among the New Agers who think they invented consciousness.

WHJ: Would you consider your work in theater and teaching in some sense a spiritual path?

PETER: I don't like to use the word "spiritual" because it reinforces a dichotomy between what's spiritual and what's not spiritual. I prefer to call it a path of simply being honest to ourselves and authentic in terms of who we are. There's a tendency to posit a result, whereas this work isn't about a result. It's about that moment-to-moment process, being true to your own experience in any given moment. And at least acknowledging that to yourself, even before the expressive aspect comes in. It's a simple, present-tense awareness of whatever is going on with you in the moment. That's your ground, the present tense awareness that allows you to come into full-blown creative expression in any given moment. This is also the ground of generosity and, potentially, the ground of unconditional joy. *