

LFS Workshops presents:

Working with Actors: Getting the Right Performance

Introduction by Udayan Prasad

For many film directors (and this applies particularly those with no experience of the theatre) actors are almost akin to aliens with whom communicating the simplest ideas becomes nigh on impossible. Either that or they are by nature obstructive and contrary beings who deliberately refuse to understand straightforward instructions. I have met established directors who have all but given up on actors and as good as leave the cast to their own devices, preferring to spend their time and energy on the visuals. Quite how one can go about the business of making a movie in this fashion is a complete mystery to me. Call me old fashioned but I like to think there needs to be some correlation between what the camera is seeing and what those in the frame are doing and how and why they are doing the things they are doing.

Then you can have a situation in which the director considers him/herself a puppet master and the cast merely human forms to be manipulated according to his or her whim. In such instances actors find they are not able to, perhaps even allowed to, use their imaginations to bring to life their characters but are expected to merely follow the 'choreography' the director has in mind for them. Having suffered this kind of approach on a film, Sean Penn gave his director a straightjacket as an end-of-production gift.

In all the years I have been directing fiction films I have rarely come across an actor who genuinely didn't want to help me to achieve my vision. That they sometimes failed was as much to do with my failure to help them inhabit their characters as any inability or lack of talent on their part. So, from where does this difficulty in communication come? The answer, I suspect, is rather simple. Those of us who have not taken the route to film making through the performing arts tend to take a lot of time and trouble dealing with and getting to know the hardware – the camera. We do this because, in order to learn the language of the cinema, it seems self-evident we should concentrate on mastering the principal tool of that language. Then there is sound, the sets, the colours, the costumes, make-up, prosthetics – explosions! – not to mention editing. All such incredibly technical and complicated stuff. And as for the actors, well, just what is the problem with being angry or sad, cool, happy or mad just like it says in the script? Why can't they simply say the lines and move from one mark to the next without making a huge fuss?

Well, that's what we are going to try and find out over the course of these 4 days.

Udayan Prasad