

Acting coaches – are they really necessary?

As a man who wears several hats – actor, teacher and sometime coach – Peter Feeney is well-placed to discuss the ins and outs of the actor-coach relationship

I was recently asked by Phil Darkins of NZ Equity to do a Q&A with Jennifer Ward-Lealand, Brita McVeigh and Miranda Harcourt on the actor-coach relationship. This presented something of a challenge. I know that an acting coach can't instill talent, or magically implant good character or a work ethic – factors, in the long run, probably as important as talent. And just because an actor you coached gets a role, this doesn't mean you were actually responsible.

I'm suspicious of acting 'systems' – the idea that an overall set approach, if faithfully applied to any acting task, will inevitably produce a good result. This idea can condemn actors to wasted years trying to master a school or technique that, while having some benefits, cannot guarantee a result.

In my experience, nothing works for sure every time. Every role or script makes unique demands and each individual will have a different approach to open up the work.

In the way that sports coaching will make a really good athlete even better, the same should be true for an actor. The coach will usually have had practical industry experience and learnt along the way. Critically, they can provide an environment that supports the actor, a space that exists solely to improve their craft, free of bitchiness, commercial competition and professional consequence. A place, in other words, where the actor can make mistakes, investigate their craft, and explore their range and inner world.

I believe the actor needs this kind of coaching on occasion because the industry isn't interested in our needs as artists. There's a technologically driven revolution going on in production and distribution, shifting us all from a scarcity of supply to a surplus of product screen model. This means that creators of TV and film will increasingly be able to make what they want and, if they can connect with an audience, be the direct financial beneficiaries. In the long run, that bodes well for our artistry, as the middle-money folk will be removed from the equation. But, for now, in terms of paid employment, we're stuck with the old commercial system, which carries the risk of consuming – but in important ways not replenishing – the actor.

Time constraints and commercial pressures encourage actors to produce consistent results using tried-and-true tricks. This is because producers are risk-averse. They are not



Peter Feeney and Andrea Brigden

Photo by Juliet Cottrell

interested in artistry, but in what has been done before and can be repeated. Casting directors and many directors find it inconvenient when actors grow or develop; they want the comfort of re-booking a guaranteed, unchanging product. It's up to actors whether they abet this, allowing themselves to become stale, commoditised and, ultimately, discarded, as the new cohort comes through, or whether they take responsibility for their ongoing artistic development, in which case a good acting teacher or coach can be useful.

I've come to realise that I have to work alongside the actor as they investigate a scene. They have to make their own choices and, over time, they learn which ones work best for them. My role is to ask the right questions, helping them see how different scripts and genres make subtly different demands. I tend to encourage the individual, even quirky, choice, the one that creates a texture and resistance to the situation and words. That keeps the work interesting and original.

While my work with an actor has to be about their own empowerment, it isn't some kind of failure if, after a few years away, they feel the urge to return to classes or coaching. To borrow Mike Alfreds's phrase, actors should embrace the notion of 'permanent training'. They inevitably plateau from time to time and need to recharge or re-evaluate, extending their range and potential by trying new techniques, and being reminded why they became actors in the first place. The profession is a marathon,

not a sprint, and actors who are neither readily satisfied nor easily discouraged tend to endure.

Some coaches are ex-actors; some never were. I still audition and work as an actor, having only ever wanted to be a part-time teacher. I should add that I coach a bit, and teach a lot. I love teaching but feel I can only help others by also being challenged, fed and replenished by creative activity.

A purely actor-coach relationship carries the risk that you'll only ever work on the actor's current material, be it audition scripts or a play they have been cast in. For example, while TV has its challenges and rewards, working on three-minute scripts forever might not stretch your acting muscle or excite your soul.

For this reason, group classes can be very beneficial. I learnt to act largely in a scene group that ran weekly for several years, with like-minded peers, where we worked mainly on good material. In a class environment, you're experiencing a somewhat purist and rarefied version of acting, free of the necessary disciplines of commercialism.

Fine writing invites actors to investigate more deeply, and they then carry their discoveries back to lesser material. As well, it inspires an actor to grasp what the profession can be about – service to ideas, rather than egos.

Peter Feeney teaches professional and aspiring actors in a weekly studio in Auckland, and coaches as well. You can read other articles on his blog www.tinderboxproductions.co.nz

Actors' health and wellbeing survey – latest findings

Here is the second lot of results of the survey conducted by Assoc Prof Ian Maxwell, Dr Mark Seton and Dr Marianna Szabo from The University of Sydney



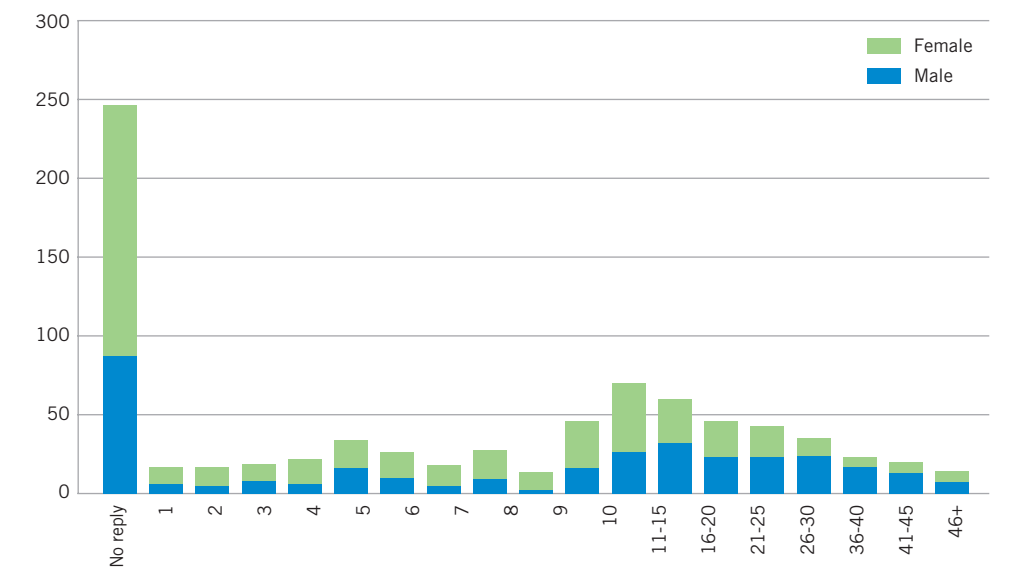
Last year, an exciting collaboration between The University of Sydney and the Equity Foundation resulted in a national online survey of actors' health and wellbeing. This study establishes a set of data that will enable researchers and Equity to identify key areas in which actors' wellbeing is both threatened and enhanced through their vocation.

The full report from the study is some time away but we will continue to give you snapshots of our findings in every issue throughout this and next year. For example, there is quantitative data to be analysed on such issues as alcohol and drug use, eating habits, depression and wellbeing.

The authors would like to acknowledge the contribution of the Equity Foundation to this research

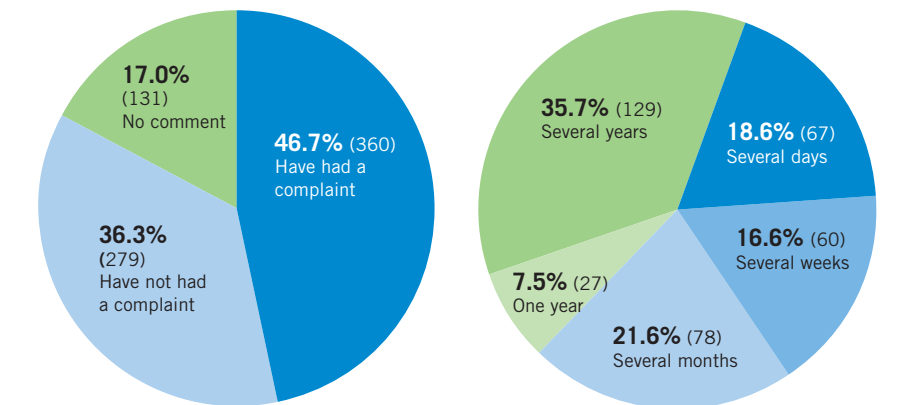


The greatest number of those who participated in the survey had worked in the industry for 11 to 15 years.



It was found that 45 per cent had experienced bodily, vocal or psychological complaints in the past year.

There was a fairly even spread across bodily (15.3%), psychological (11.5%) and overall (10.7%) discomfort, with vocal complaints (9.4%) being slightly less. However, it was concerning to learn that a significant number of the participants (35.7%) had suffered from their complaints for several years.



Such complaints had varying degrees of impact on the actor's capacity to perform, with 18.2 per cent reporting they still tried to work despite experiencing strong symptoms of discomfort. Complaints strongly affected the performance of 9.4 per cent of those surveyed and, for 5.1 per cent, performance was not possible.

