

## Go With What You Know

I guess you could say I played my most important dramatic role when I was six months old at Keller Memorial Lutheran Church in Washington, D.C. I was the baby Jesus in the church Christmas Pageant.

My acting career as a sentient being really began, though, when Penny Rosenwasser's mother, who was coincidentally also my tenth grade English teacher, cornered me in the freshman locker bay one morning. Penny was my girlfriend. Auditions for the Hart/Kaufman comedy, "You Can't Take It with You" were that afternoon in the auditorium and Mrs. Rosenwasser thought I really ought to try out for a part. Mrs. Rosenwasser was a chain smoker at the time (she had a lung removed thirty years later) and it was a combination of her dragon breath, her Charleston charm, and her Jewish-mother guilt that defused my mumbled protestations,

"Uh, I have to get home... to, uh, feed the ...hamster and I got some homework in Geometry ...and...my paper route... I never took the late bus before...and ...."

Sylvia Ness Rosenwasser was not accustomed to accepting a "no" from anyone through the sheer force of her will and her aforementioned personal chemistry (smoker's breath, charm, and guilt) and that's why I found myself desperately thumbing through audition pieces in the school library during lunch, even though my teenage boy's stomach gurgled with hunger. I would have rather starved than disappoint Mrs. Rosenwasser. "Disappoint", by the way, was one of the most powerful words that Mrs. R. had in her arsenal, one she tried out on nearly all of her students eventually, from time to time actually finding one or two a year upon whom the weapon worked. Once she discovered that word's power over the hapless child, she set out on her mission to spur that talented (usually) but unfocused (always) young person on to greatness. I discovered in the weeks and months to come that there was a steady stream of past and present students visiting Mrs. Rosenwasser evenings and weekends to report their current successes. I really wasn't that special after all. There in her living room she would sit in state surrounded by students competing for her favor in an informal, spontaneous but predictable symposium entitled "Success In America" hosted by the matron of honor, Sylvia Ness Rosenwasser. At least that is the way it plays out in my memory today.

With time running out, I remembered suddenly my English class reading that morning: Edgar Allen Poe's short stories, and I recalled the opening paragraph of "The Tell-Tale Heart". "Yeah, that's dramatic!" I whispered in desperation, "*Go with what you know*," I repeated that misunderstood something I heard some actor, (or was it a writer), say in some interview on some TV show. And so it was that I found myself mounting the boards for the very first time to shakily read, "The Tell-Tale Heart" by Edgar Allen Poe." I cleared my throat, took a

deep breath and plunged in, “It was true I was nervous, dreadfully nervous...I could hear all things in heaven and hell...but why would you say that I am mad?” Mid-sentence I heard what sounded like a heavily vocalized sigh and then a suppressed cough emanate from the dark maw of the auditorium. Shielding my eyes from the blinding lekos and fresnels, I looked in the direction of the sound, center aisle, ten rows back. “Huh?” The director, Mr. Smith, repeated the question of which I had only partially been aware, “Are you going to *read the whole damn thing?*” Instantly the bottom fell out of my head and then it began to swim. Giggles and scoffs from the other auditioners reverberated in my ears. My blood pressure dropped ...ears began to ring...field of vision narrowed... couldn’t breathe...palms sweaty...mouth became instantly dry...the taste of rusty razor blades. Students waiting in the auditorium reported to others the next day that my eyes rolled perfectly into the top of my skull and for a full ten seconds I stood absolutely motionless looking with pupil-less eyes into the false night of the darkened auditorium. (I’d only felt like this once before in my life, totally humiliated in front of an audience. It was at the sixth grade Spring Talent Show. My mother thought it would be “really cute” if I borrowed the ballet tutu, tights and toe shoes owned by Patsy Fagan, an eight-year old girl up the block who, according to her mother, was at the “top of the growth chart for her age”. Those items of apparel, a blond shoulder-length wig, rouge and lipstick combined to make me unrecognizable, even to my friends. “You make a very pretty girl, Bruce,” my mother had noted after the “Red Passion” lipstick application. It was in this get-up that I hosted the talent show. (I am still vague about why I cross-dressed for this event. Could it really have been a Halloween talent show?) At one point in the evening I stood to introduce the next act and completely forgot the name of a boy I’d known since kindergarten. “Ladies and Gentlemen, our next act is one of my close personal friends and a super juggler, let’s bring on...” I looked at the kid. The kid looked back smiling. “Let’s welcome ...uh.” I looked at the kid, the teacher behind the curtain, my mother, the audience, kid, teacher, principal, audience, kid, teacher, audience...floor. I passed right out, smacking the wooden stage floor directly with my nose, lips and chin, sounding exactly like a landed tuna on a boat deck. I heard later that when the principal rolled me over, there was a huge smeary “Red Passion” kiss on the varnished pine floor. Just a note to the Drama teachers of the world here: it is possible to pass out from embarrassment. Stagehands should be equipped with pillows, blankets and smelling salts at all times.)

So there I was again (except three years later) frozen in an unseeing stare on the stage of the high school auditorium, preparing to kiss the floor again once my blood pressure dropped completely off the chart. It was at that moment that the drama coach, Mr. Donald Smith, said the ten words that I followed down the primrose path to my “life in the theater”. “Whoa, that is really an effective face for that poem,” I heard drift from the black cavern before me. Just as quickly as I had slipped into my catatonic state, I returned to the land of

the living, bowed, said with an air of confidence, "Thank you," and exited stage left. But it was not until I'd been in fifty plays and had earned nearly three degrees in Theater that I really returned to my senses.

The next day I was amazed to discover that I had been assigned the part of "Grandpa" in the school play. I'd become a character actor at age fourteen...plus I had, at last, a success to share at Mrs. Rosenwasser's next living room seminar.