

The Balanced Human Being Who Sings

What's happening to the real you as you pursue your career? Here's an experienced and very talented singer you've probably seen and admired to explore the question rather fearlessly with you. You can hear more of Adria. She will be a featured speaker at the upcoming convention. (See the CS website at <http://www.classicalsinger.com>)

by Adria Firestone



I'm Not a Trained Monkey. That's the working title of a book I'm writing. What do I mean? I've been onstage for 40 years, and I can say I have really learned my craft, as an actor, as a singer and most recently, as a director. The thing that surprised me when I stopped running around the world, was just how much I disliked "the business." What I disliked most was that I felt like a trained monkey.

Sing this note, this aria, beautifully and I'll give you a banana. Twirl while you sing and I'll give you two bananas, do it on roller skates. . .you get the picture.

In all the training, in all the "shoulds" that assail us as artists, in all the sweaty glamour, where is the balanced human being who is supposed to be the foundation of the artist? I had to go deep within to discover the essence of who I really am.

Guess what? I'm not a trained monkey. I've thrown down my bananas and started a revolution of self-discovery.

Why have we let a coterie of managers, coaches, directors and colleagues tell us how high to jump, what color of vest to wear and

how to dance to their organ grinder tunes? Why do we cringe when our voices are mocked? Why does our self-esteem crumble when we lose an audition? Could it be because we have been too busy honing the vocal skills and haven't spent enough time honing the skills that strengthen our inner voice, the voice of our hearts, our souls? Have we sold it all for a high C, or a low E flat?

You may say, "That doesn't apply to me," and stop reading—that's OK. Maybe it doesn't apply to you, but maybe it is so accurate it has to be denied.

Human beings who choose art to express themselves have enormous courage (from the French word *coeur*: heart) and enormous frailty. Why deny it? It is the magic duality that gives fire to our creative genius. Many of us gravitate to the stage for safety, to find a beautiful refuge from an ugly world, and a place to feel loved—even if only for a moment, and even if the love is make-believe.

The bits of tissue on which we base a career are subject to the human laws of aging: when they go, we are left with ourselves, devoid of the tricks that made us so sought after. In Hollywood, the story is the same. Many stars spend so much money and energy on their outer selves, lifting everything, trying in vain to hold on to a moment in time. What about lifting our souls? Fame is a chimera that vanishes into thin air. The divine spark of your being *never* vanishes. It's worth working on. It is eternal. Think about that.

In show business, the process goes like this: *Who is Adria Firestone? Get me Adria Firestone. Get me a young Adria Firestone. Who is Adria Firestone?*

Get it? When I use the phrase "trained monkey," I say it with enormous love. We are creatures worthy of admiration. Oscar Wilde wrote in his novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, of the actress Sybil Vane: "To spiritualize one's age—that is something worth doing. If this girl can give a soul to those who have lived without one, if she can create the sense of beauty in people whose lives have been sordid and ugly, if she can strip them of their selfish-

ness, and lend them tears for sorrows that are not their own, she is worthy of all your adoration, worthy of the adoration of the world." We are not only our voice, or our talent, or our skills—we are human beings first and performers second. I have seen that distinction so often blurred. Our talent is just one facet of our total being.

Just how important are we as singers?

I thought I had perspective, that I didn't define myself by my job. I was wrong. If you are in the middle of the desert and your car breaks down, do you need an opera singer or a mechanic? If you are sick, do you need a doctor or an opera singer? We all have gifts, we all have specialties, but they are just that:

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gifts and specialties, not the essence of who we are. Cyrano de Bergerac says it all in five words, “My finery’s in the heart.”

Something that helped me put all of this in perspective was coaching. Singers think of coaching in terms of voice only, but life coaching gives balance to the performer who resides within the human being. It can provide a per-

spective that gazing at our own image does not. A coach is a collaborative partner who enlarges our possibilities for designing the life we desire, while focusing our vision and our energy on achieving it.

Coaching can illuminate our hidden needs, the values that drive us and help identify what we are tolerating in our lives. Sounds simple, yes? No—it is profound.

I discovered I never paid attention to my needs, and thought I knew all about my values. And eliminate tolerations? What were tolerations anyway?

I was so fascinated by my personal discoveries that I decided to become a life coach. I found tools that were invaluable in opening my eyes to my true purpose and to reconnecting to my essential self—not the shell of the opera singer that protected my soft underbelly. I found that if we ignore our needs they become a powerful force that controls our lives. We respond to subliminal promptings that motivate us to do things that scatter our energy and divert us from our desired destination.

We are extremely fortunate as artists to be paid for dragging out our dark sides in the arena of live theater. We can reach deep into our psyches and create a totally charismatic, light-filled character, one whom we might be afraid to reveal in real life.

Acting is pulling fragments from our inmost selves and exposing them to the bright light of a spot, or an amber gel. We give audiences pieces of their own lives to explore in the safety of a darkened theater. It is artistic psychotherapy—and it can be had for the price of admission. We get to scream our rage, our love and our fear—albeit beautifully. It is a privilege to be on stage.

An artist deals with the vast palette of real human emotions—but the world within the proscenium is not real. It is an illusion. It is in our real life that we must examine the “undertoad.” That is how we grow. That is how we feed the font from which our creativity flows.

When we have a strong personal foundation, we are not swayed by what others think of us, or our voices, or our looks. We are in constant competition, but only with ourselves, to be the best we can be. We leave fashion behind, and develop personal style. If we are balanced, and cultivate and nourish our mind, body and spirit, the sensitive artist’s nature has a safe place to grow and expand. If we stop learning, and seeking, and growing as people, we may as well try to stop time, take the bananas and tip our tasseled hats.

I, for one, refuse.

Adria Firestone traveled the world as an actress and opera singer in a great variety of roles. She was especially renowned for Carmen and last did Regina at the 2002 Olympics in Utah. She is presently teaching at New Jersey City University and is a life coach and speaker. LightWorkers21C@aol.com www.adriafirestone.com

