**To act or not to act!**

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“One of the things about acting is it allows you to live other people’s lives without having to pay the price”-Robert De Niro

For human beings, the mere thought of being deprived of entertainment is enough to cast them into depression. From times immemorial people have been finding different ways and means to enliven their otherwise insipid existence. Around 43,000 years back, early humans have been known to enjoy themselves by playing music on flutes made from bird bone and mammoth ivory. These instruments were found in a cave in southern Germany in 2012. Researchers have discovered that Stone Age folk would go for camping to places, now visited by hikers, for the purpose of both recreation and hunting. They are also believed to have pets and some of the archeological burial sites have been discovered with both the human corpse and a pet dog. In short, leisure activities have always been pursued by human beings in various forms and as civilization progressed, entertainment became more sophisticated. The modern day technological advancement has taken this industry to staggering heights.

We have made headway from simple banquets, storytelling, sports, street performances, magic shows to higher levels of literature, music, theatre, games and of course the celluloid world of cinema. Every kind of performing art which people enjoy and look forward to, demands meticulous preparation, tremendous practice, hard labour, great aesthetic sense, money and time. Sitting through a concert, one hardly realizes the amount of pain each instrumentalist suffered to produce a few melodies which mesmerize the audience. Similarly, when a play is enacted there is much applause for the writers, actors, directors, background workers but again, we fail to appreciate the efforts that are made to put a smile on our faces, to lift up our low spirits, to bring us laughter and tears by transforming us into a make-believe land of glamour, heroes, warriors, adventurists and comedians.

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A grand salute to all those men, women, children and even animals whom we eagerly invite with open arms into the comfort and security of our homes to give us a few hours of distraction from our mundane routine. The fatigued housewife, the tensed office-goer, the tired labourer, the hard-pressed student, the ailing grandparents, the many uncles and aunts, all keenly wait for their favourite artists to appear on the television to provide them with a few moments of jocularity before calling it a night. Those looking for fun and frolic, enjoy an evening out at the theatres or the movies. So the bottom line is that we derive pleasure at the expense of someone else’s hard work. Now, these someone else are that protagonists who have to step outside the realm of their own personality and put on the garb of another’s. Meryl Streep, a popular and charming actor who has pursued her career with great passion says: “I’m curious about other people. That’s the essence of my acting. I’m interested in what it would be like to be you.”

All very well to be curious about others and to fictionally live their lives for a short time but trouble starts when these larger than life imaginary characters start taking control of the person playing that role. Here is where we, the public falter, in looking at the actors, not as they are but as they appear to us in a particular character. An interesting example would be that of comedy actors whose gimmicks, jokes and performances send us rolling with laughter. On meeting them in real life, one tries to (mis)treat them in the expectation that they would respond with their wit and humour. We are unable to discern that they too are human beings and are probably passing through a serious phase in their lives. In fact, one of the Indian comedians, in a television programme once protested on the attitude of people who try to banter him in public. “Why do they think we can be made fun of, off the screen? We are sober men and women and should not be taken for granted.”

Those who play the villain are another genre of actors. Their fame as negative character overtakes them in actuality. People shy away from them or behold them with fear as if they would suddenly turn upon them like in reel life. Many known actors have admitted difficulty in establishing matrimonial relations on account of their devilish impression. According to Vicky Kaushal, another talented Bollywood artist, “Acting between action and cut is temporary. The result is permanent.”

At times, a particular character is played by someone for a prolonged time and while the actors enjoy popularity, the cost of playing the role is enormous as it devours their regular image. A Pakistani star of a popular children’s television programme, despite the fact that she was elated on the success of her character role she seemed a bit forlorn (from her facial expression) at being appreciated more for the fictional role, painfully trying to assert that she was really not the character she was portraying. Such is the dilemma of some actors!

The School of Psychology at the University of Adelaide, Australia, has conducted research under the lead author Alison Robb in the psychological aspects of being professional actors that penetrates the mask of glamour associated with them. They have found actors highly vulnerable to depression and anxiety. After interviewing almost 20 professional actors, Robb writes: “There are many positives associated with acting, such as feelings of personal growth and a sense of purpose in the actors’ work. Many of them see it as a ‘calling’ and couldn’t imagine doing anything else professionally; they feel driven to do it.” She then goes onto say: “Actors also report experiencing vicarious trauma through their acting experiences – they are so emotionally, intellectually and physically engaged in their roles that it can be difficult to switch off. Some report having nightmares and intrusive thoughts related to their roles.”

These are disturbing facts that we need to know and understand, especially those who want to take up professional acting as a career. They need to realize that at times they would be given roles which may affect their own personalities in a way that their real selves could be overshadowed by their screen persona. Good actors do not just appear on the stage and perform their parts, they actually live them. Apt examples would be where conscientious artistes have transformed themselves into their character roles by growing hair, moustache or beard or conversely shaving their own off. Similarly, losing and putting on weight to fit the real image is commonly observed. These are acts before the recording of plays or movies and of course, which alter the individuality of the performer. For what some of them receive in return, in terms of money and accolades, this could be a very small price to pay since this activity is a means to their livelihood. Having said this, innumerable actors have managed to maintain their celebrity disposition in spite of the extreme nature of roles they have played. This requires a strong temperament and will to safeguard their bona fide identity which depicts their real life human image.

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