



A JOURNAL OF ORTHODOX FAITH AND CULTURE

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AN INSATIABLE DESIRE TO SHARE THE EXCITEMENT: THE ACTOR AS A YOUNG MAN

John Marshall, a twenty-year-old actor from southern Vermont, relates his experience of four summer-stock musicals, a credible cache of Shakespeare, and how he negotiates the challenges, joys and opportunities of contemporary theatre as an Orthodox Christian.

RTE: John, please tell us about your background and how you became an actor.

JOHN: From when I was very young, I was fascinated with sounds, with making up voices—performing, in a sense. I had something I wanted to give, an insatiable desire to share the excitement I had for all the small things in life. My acting and singing was based on: “This is joyful and good, and I want you to have it too.” I still work from that same feeling. At first there were small school plays that everyone was in, simple recitations of rhymed stories. As time went on, the plays became more in depth—there were things to figure out, learn, and execute. To do something well, and for people to see and be changed by it, is very much tied to our Orthodox belief in the goodness of creation and our response to that goodness.

One local opportunity that I had every year was called, “*Get Thee to the Funnery...*”—a two week long Shakespeare summer camp that was begun by Peter Gould, an author and playwright who teaches in Vermont, where from age ten to fifteen I was taught acting by young performing artists who were collaborating on this project with him. We kids were given an abridged

Opposite: John Marshall.

version of a Shakespeare play and we spent the first few days reading through it to make sure that everyone understood the script, then we chose parts. We had that weekend and the following week to put together an entire play, and we did this every summer. Over the years we performed *Macbeth*, *As You Like It*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, and then *Hamlet*, always outdoors with no props and no costumes except for black clothes and one identifying piece such as a hat, belt or scarf so that people could recognize who the character was. We often had up to five people playing the main character, so we'd pass the identifying piece off as we switched actors.

RTE: Wonderful. What did this teach you?

JOHN: First it taught me to be comfortable with the physical nature of performing, with vocalizing and focusing my attention. You may be a natural actor, but you can't let your mind wander. It has to be all or nothing, a complete giving of oneself to the moment. I also loved determining what defines a character and communicating that to another actor who shared the same part so that we could portray the same character. It also forced me to develop stage presence, where you firmly and assertively present yourself in the theatre space. You can't be timid. Being outside was great for voice-training; you had to project and be present.

RTE: Did you perform in high school?

JOHN: Yes, I did theatre and some improvisation in high school. I was a technician for our high-school musical my freshman year, where I realized that this wasn't for me. Not that I wasn't technically inclined, but I couldn't stop singing the songs into the headset. I'd be running a spotlight from the balcony and singing along. This was a great opportunity for everyone because it was a community effort for the entire school, not necessarily about making a perfect show. The seniors were given priority for the parts, which was nice because some of these students might not have had such a chance otherwise. It's amazing what performing can do to help people find themselves. I saw many students become more sure of themselves and grow in unexpected ways. Usually people think of acting as becoming someone else, but I find that if you're doing it right, you learn how to be comfortable with yourself. I auditioned for the school musical in my sophomore year and was one of two underclassmen to have a speaking role. The musical was *Back to the 80's*, so I got to sing "Love Shack," by the B52s. Another production was *Hello Dolly*

in my junior year—a teen summer show at the Chandler Music Hall in Randolph, Vermont, where I played the role of Cornelius Hackle, a 33-year-old man who has always been in a small town and never truly lived. Dolly has a way of pushing people into getting on with their lives and sends Cornelius to New York City where he has a night on the town and falls in love. A year later I played Captain Hook in *Peter Pan*, with the same teen production. A third big musical was *The Music Man*, in which I had the lead playing Harold Hill. That was different because it was in Lebanon, New Hampshire, and included a cast of seventy high-schoolers from around the area. It was the largest performance I'd been in and, unlike the local Vermont productions, I didn't know the other actors before we started.

RTE: You've mentioned that your inspiration for acting is bound up with your Orthodox world-view. How did you become Orthodox and come to live in Vermont?

JOHN: My father, who was a carpenter and tile setter, grew up in Vermont. I'm a blend of Irish-English on my father's side, and Polish-Ukrainian on my mother's. My folks were living in Oklahoma City at the time I was born and had been searching for real faith for some time. In both Pennsylvania and Chicago, where she grew up, my mother had seen churches with onion domes and knew vaguely that her background was Carpatho-Russian. Eventually, she and my Dad found the St. Elijah Antiochian Church in Oklahoma City, and immediately thought, "This is it. This is what we are supposed to do." When I came along, they told the priest, "We want to have our son baptized here." He said, "Fine, and what about you two?" They were chrismated, so I'm cradle Orthodox of convert parents. My father is no longer with us—he passed away a few months ago, but he brought my brother and me up in the Church.

We moved back to Vermont before I was two, and I've lived there ever since. The first eleven years were on an old farm in a valley with no cell phone reception. I lived in nature. I've always been a country boy and always will be; I love the "peace of wild things." My family attends Holy Resurrection Church in Claremont, New Hampshire served by Fr. Andrew Tregubov, and occasionally, the St. Jacob of Alaska Church in Northfield, Vermont. I've grown up very much a part of the church—first as an altar server, and once I became serious about singing, the choir became my place.

A Waldorf Education

Another remarkable part of my childhood was that I attended a Waldorf school from kindergarten to eighth grade, which definitely awakened my creativity. For those who aren't familiar with these schools, Rudolph Steiner was a German educational philosopher who developed a type of schooling called Waldorf Education. This philosophy is based on bringing up the whole human being by understanding how a child develops intellectually, emotionally, physically and spiritually, and how each of these aspects are interconnected and should be awakened in well-considered wholesome ways that don't expect too much too early, yet don't neglect any area. It is very natural and art-based, using music and rhythm, stories, colors, painting, art and dance to teach the children. We also did reading, writing, math and science, of course. We were in a rural area and the Wellspring Waldorf School, which I attended, was only a short walk away from the woods, so we were very comfortable with nature. The feeling always was, "We were created on this earth, so we might as well get to know it." This early training in music and dance was a great help in my later development as an actor, and my relationship with stories, words and meaning was always alive. I really didn't understand how alive it was until I started to hear about other people's educations. My parents, my Orthodox upbringing, and my early education in a Waldorf School has been a blessing to me in ways that I am still discovering. Waldorf education makes you experience the world in a poignant and sometimes even tragic way, because you feel so deeply connected to nature and to people.

RTE: If you aren't divorced from nature then you also aren't divorced from the fallenness of the created world, and I imagine that is where the poignancy comes in. People who live in nature tend to be realists.

JOHN: True, and I believe I am. I tend to be an idealist as well, but I hope it's never too far removed from practicality.

RTE: Since you've grown up Orthodox and wanting to act, have you thought about how acting fits in with Orthodoxy, or does it seem such an organic whole that you don't feel the need to consider it?

JOHN: Definitely, for most of my life, it was the latter. Offering my God-given talents to whomever would receive them was just living. It was so natural

that I never thought about it. As I said, even as a baby, I would take sounds and repeat them over and over. Even now, I'll often catch myself repeating a single phrase of a song. Although I later started looking at this talent more objectively, I never questioned the goodness of the gift. By the grace of God, my performance was always connected to my life in the Church.

RTE: In spite of his theological misapprehensions, Steiner had a wholesome concept of childhood and the needs of children.

JOHN: Most of the teachers were wonderful. Only occasionally did I see a teacher whose interpretation of Waldorf education seemed to lean too close to naturalism; for example, with too much emphasis on Mother Earth, or on the gnomes and fairies of fairy-tales. It's good to understand everything as a spirit and energy in the presence of our Creator, but these are not things we worship. Of course this isn't what these people think they are doing, but nevertheless they allow their attention to be caught up in "the spirit of the flower" and such things. Flowers are powerful and they have their own natures and energies that are a response to God; we don't need to personify them or make them into self-sufficient beings.

RTE: You seem to have come out of this pretty clear-headed. It would be interesting if you attempted a Waldorf-type education founded on Orthodox principles.

JOHN: It would! It's my dream to start an Orthodox Waldorf school. The Church also educates the whole person, and I think that Waldorf education is to childhood as Orthodoxy is to the soul.

Choosing Roles and Keeping a Balance

RTE: In today's theatre and films, we are often confronted with the disturbed and tragic lives of famous actors. Generalizations are always unfair, but have you thought about how you are going to stay balanced in this very difficult milieu?

JOHN: The first thing I would say is that these actors often do wonderful work and it's a tragedy to see them lost and hurt in so many ways. There are also many competent stable actors that we don't hear about. All I can do is strive to do my best work and pray to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ that

He keep me on a holy path. I owe my work to him and He allows me to strive for goodness.

RTE: Which actors inspire you?

JOHN: Tom Hanks. It's good to know that there is someone Orthodox in the acting world, and that he is so good at what he does. When I was in New York last year I saw *Captain Phillips*. It's a riveting tale based on a true story of a merchant vessel captain whose ship is captured by Somali pirates. Tom Hanks is such a natural actor that the performance of his character utterly immerses you in the story. Another actor I admire is Sir Ian McKellen, who

but a very twisted version. I wasn't familiar with the script at the time of my audition; I thought it would be a vehicle to reveal some truth about the Gospel. I was surprised when I was offered a smaller role than I expected, and I thought, "Something's wrong here." Not because I was disappointed, but I had the feeling, "If a door closes, don't try to break it down, you're just wasting your time." When I reevaluated the show from a distance, I realized, "This is so blasphemous. It's so wrong." They don't even show Christ's resurrection in the end. You couldn't have played any of those parts and brought out real truth—at least I couldn't. I understood that sometimes if you can't do anything, you just have to walk away.



John (r.) as Cornelius Hackle from *Hello, Dolly!* Chandler Music Hall, Randolph, VT, July 2011.

has not only played many Shakespearean stage roles, but his film credits are well known: Gandalf in *Lord of the Rings*, and Magneto from the *X-Men* films. He carries the craft with dignity and grace.

RTE: So many roles seem either too silly to be taken seriously, or are vulgar, violent or blasphemous. Have you ever turned down such a role, and could you make a living if you did?

JOHN: My training-wheels for turning down parts was just after high school. I auditioned for the Andrew Lloyd Webber/Tim Rice musical, *Jesus Christ Superstar*, which is not only an inaccurate portrayal of the life of Christ,

As to your second question, if I am to make a living by being a Christian actor, I do not have to compromise what I know to be the truth because God is in charge, and I do not have to sell myself short by taking parts that are immoral or disgusting to make ends meet. If I do what I know to be right and put myself out there to serve, that will be used for good and truth, and God will provide. I have no worries that I'm not going to make it, but if I don't make it, that will just mean that I'm supposed to be doing something else.

Performing Arts Training in Manhattan

RTE: You recently did a term at an acting school in New York City. How did that work out?

JOHN: I attended a conservatory program in musical theatre at a performing arts school in Manhattan. Everything about getting into the school felt guided and fell into my lap: the audition was successful, and I raised all the money for tuition with a crowd-funding site and a benefit concert. My father died just before I left for New York, so I arrived very tired. I was excited to be there at first, but living in New York wore me out and literally started to hurt—so many people, so much advertising, so much noise, so much concrete, electricity everywhere. Within a couple of months I felt, “I just want to go home,” and wondered, “Am I a quitter if I leave?” Then the classes started to go sour. I wasn’t sure why, because I was simply taking in what was being taught, but then realized it was the lack of performance opportunity; it was all exercise and no context. There was never an audience except for one “cafe night” for which I’d organized a barbershop quartet. That invigorated me and kept me going for awhile, but I finally realized that I wasn’t getting what I needed, and that I needed to come home. So I did.

RTE: If you hadn’t gone, you might always have wondered what you’d missed. Still, aren’t you afraid that you’ve lost something by not finishing?

JOHN: The school was great— I gained so much technical training, skills and discipline, an understanding of the professional environment and knowing what’s expected of you, as well as the connections I made with the amazing faculty and students. The exercises were wonderful, but I’m a hands-on learner, and I can’t just do exercises for exercise sake. That doesn’t mean that you don’t practice intensely, but I needed to get back on the stage.

RTE: Perhaps the program is more valuable for students who haven’t had your theatre experience.

JOHN: Perhaps. I recently heard a quote to the effect that people who really accomplish a craft, learn it not through school, but through doing it over and over. You have to have mentors and teachers, of course, but in the end you just keep doing it. You take the plunge and figure it out.

RTE: Who are your mentors and how have they influenced you?

JOHN: Directors of musicals and plays, fellow actors, and so on, who have taken an interest in me and my work, and who’ve had a rich experience that I can learn from. I have several wonderful mentors who have trained me over the years and since New York I’ve been mapping my own road. I have the singing, acting and dancing resources, and the disciplined experience in New York showed me what it is to put it all together.

Shared Humanity: Taking on a Character

RTE: The idea of “taking on” the emotions or words of another person sometimes seems foreign to the direct, straight-forward presentation of oneself that we strive for as Orthodox Christians. How do you deal with this in the theatre, and do you feel compromised by taking on an historical or fictional personality?

JOHN: One thing I’ve learned is that we all share a common humanity. When you put on a character all you have is who you are and what you can do, and you can only play another person by calling on aspects of yourself. It’s not becoming someone else as much as it is becoming you in a different setting. You can identify with a character’s likes, dislikes, desires and fears even if you don’t live in those exact circumstances yourself. For example, I may not be jealous in the same way that Shakespeare’s Othello is jealous but I’ve been jealous and I know what it’s like to be jealous, so I can put myself in that place. It’s not a matter of becoming someone else, but more like finding that place in myself and exposing it to view.

On the other hand, there is also method acting, which can lead to confusion if taken to extremes. Constantine Stanislavsky, the great Russian actor and theatre director who died in 1938, wrote three important books: *An Actor Prepares*, *Building a Character*, and *Creating a Role*. His first work was *An Actor Prepares*, but his ideas were later revised in *Building a Character*, in which he said that you can’t go to extremes or you’ll kill yourself. Much of modern method acting is taken only from his first book, so some people say, “You have to totally lose yourself, forget who you are, and become the character.” The truth is that taking on a role is more like putting on a piece

of clothing. If you put on a suit, it changes how you carry yourself. It doesn't mean that you're a different person, you're just a different version of yourself. That's why I love good costuming—it helps you get into your role.

We've all heard of Heath Ledger, who played The Joker in the Batman movie, *The Dark Knight*. Now, he did a really good job at becoming The Joker, but did he do a good job of being okay with who he was afterwards? He—we hope accidentally—took an overdose of antidepressants and sleeping pills in the aftermath of shooting the film. Did he fall into the darkness of the psychopathic murderer he played? You are an actor, but you are not really that character, and you have to be clear about that. Likewise, Philip Hoffman who played Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman* so many times on Broadway, died this year of a heroin-cocaine overdose. Actors can lose themselves. I recently heard of an actor who went too far with method acting while playing a secret agent. He didn't show up for a newspaper interview, so the interviewer left and was walking down the street, when she realized that someone was following her. It was him, still being a secret agent, following her, which was silly and unnecessary. Yes, it's good to go run a real marathon before playing a scene in which you run a marathon, but you don't have to throw away who you are. Of course, who you are is good enough.

RTE: You know, the Church Fathers say that if you want to attain virtue, you start by pretending you have it. If you act as if you have it, it will come. Would the reverse also be true, that someone taking on a very negative role might also take on negativity?

JOHN: Good actors have said, "Don't be afraid to take on a negative role if it shows something important. As long as you know who you are you don't have to worry about any role you take on." However, it's true that if you exercise thinking evil sadistic thoughts, even as a fictional character, that mode of thinking can become a habit. It creates a rut that can be hard to get out of.

RTE: I remember C.S. Lewis saying that the hardest thing he ever did was to write his Christian apologetic novel, *The Screwtape Letters*, a fictional account of letters between the demon Screwtape and his trainee "nephew". Every day Lewis worked on it, he said, was a day he had to get into the demonic mind, "a world of darkness and dust." Of course, *Screwtape* has touched millions of readers, but I imagine that such a device in writing or acting is not without a price.

JOHN: In these kinds of roles, it's very important to choose and to make sure that you are not going too far. These roles have to be entered into, but if you know who you are, particularly if you are a Christian, you can come back. It's also about praying: "God, help me to know the truth." As an Orthodox Christian I already know who I am and that our true identity is in Christ. There's really nothing else for us.

RTE: An audience is also impacted by negative or tragic roles. What good would come out of your playing an unsavory or evil character?

JOHN: The value of such a role would be if it's not a glorification of evil or if, in the end, the character somehow understands that he's been wrong. Even in the final moments of life, if you understand that you've done the wrong thing, even if you've completely wasted your life and now face death, at least you are now facing the right direction. As sad and tragic as a character can be, if that moment of turning around and looking back towards God is potent enough to show people what it's like to go down that road and repent, this is a character worth playing. The point is that you can always turn back. God is always still there for you, no matter how wrong you've been and how painful it is to realize.

As an actor, you can provide a useful lesson—first, don't do what this character does, but even if you do, he has taken a step towards redemption and you also can be redeemed. This is the kind of negative character that I might take if the role was offered, but I won't seek out tragic parts.

RTE: Putting it that way, there's not a whole lot of difference between any repentant character and telling the life of St. Moses the Black, St. Mary of Egypt, or even the good thief crucified with the Lord.

JOHN: I would gladly play St. Moses or the good thief on the cross.

Good Patterns

RTE: How then do you and other actors "turn back into yourself" after a performance?

JOHN: I really don't know what other people's methods are, but I have my own routines—good patterns in my life that are small daily touchstones of who I am. The main one is life in the Church: daily prayers, Sunday and

festal services, confession, singing in the choir, talking with family and other parishioners and receiving Holy Communion, which is the main thing. That is where I find out who I am, and these are the people I know who keep me in touch with myself. As you said, if you practice virtue, you become virtuous.

RTE: What do you make of what some of the Holy Fathers say about acting? It's usually a reference in a longer letter or sermon, and seems to reflect actors' notoriety for loose living.

JOHN: I do know that there is a church canon that says you can't be an actor and be a priest. In the days this canon was written, performances were often

give it." They've always supported my following that high road. Before I went to New York my spiritual father said, "It's very difficult there, because much of that life is about being self-absorbed and getting attention, but I know you can do it." For me, that meant going and gaining some experience, yet having the wisdom to come back home when it was time. The fact is that New York doesn't need me right now. I don't need to be there. I can work here.

RTE: Do you know of any actor saints?

JOHN: One is St. Genesius of Rome who, according to a late tradition, had a conversion experience as he was performing a satire on Christian baptism



John as Cornelius Hackle in Hello Dolly!, Chandler Music Hall, Randolph, VT, July 2011.

lewd and the acting lifestyle sometimes included prostitution, so this is also a matter of historical context. What the Fathers say is very applicable to the immoral lifestyles that can accompany acting, but I'm a Christian and I'm going to be a Christian actor.

RTE: Of course, canons were written in a specific historical context and canonists try to extract the underlying principles to apply them in our time. Has your own spiritual father supported you in acting?

JOHN: Yes. I've had several wonderful priests as mentors and teachers, and all of them have said, "What you have to give is good, and you will find out how to

in front of Emperor Diocletian. He refused to renounce his Christianity and was beheaded. Both he and St. Vitus were early martyrs, and in the West are considered the patron saints of actors. This is an example of the redeeming aspect of taking on a character. If I take on a character who is a saint, perhaps his life may shed the light of Christ on mine.

RTE: Rarely do Orthodox Christians in Greece, Russia, or Eastern Europe make a film portraying the Lord or a saint, and some say that it is impossible for an actor who is not a saint himself to give an accurate portrayal.

On the other hand in the West we've had centuries of plays about saints, including mystery plays (generally biblical stories), miracle plays (saints'

lives) and morality plays (actors representing virtues and vices). We still have many passion plays and films about Christ. I remember a friend telling me that he'd loved the old Zeffirelli film, *Jesus of Nazareth*, but had to stop watching it because the image of the actor who played Christ continually came to mind during prayer. What would you say to this?

JOHN: For me, this is a kind of revelation of what acting is, or at least what I think it should be. You mentioned this man picturing Christ as this actor. What do I do? I picture Christ as He is portrayed in an icon, but I don't picture one particular icon. It's not the specific facial features that have been painted of Him, but that He is a man, that He is Christ, and that He shines with resplendent glory. With an icon, you have wood and paint—fallen material things that are shaped and fashioned by someone who knows how, into a door to the Kingdom of Heaven. These materials are redeemed from their fallen state and become something venerable, because they lead us to God. I am made of flesh and bone, fallen, yet I have been fashioned in a deep way by One Who knows and Who intends me also to be a door to the Kingdom of Heaven.

RTE: We have the image of God inside of us in a way these bits of paint and wood do not, but because we are all sinners we don't have the same degree of material innocence as the creation—or of grace, in the case of a saint. Also, didn't the Eastern Church Fathers discourage three-dimensional statues because they had previously been objects of worship?

JOHN: Yes, and I also think that a free-standing statue presumes the fallen state of being separate from the image—whereas an icon uses reverse perspective to envelop you, to draw you in. A statue makes it clear that you are distinct from that image or that person, a reflection of the Fall.

RTE: Wouldn't an actor also make you feel that fallen separation?

JOHN: A good actor, no. I've watched a film, play, or musical where you are so drawn in by the beauty of what they are doing, that you can't take your eyes off their performance. This is also an icon. If God wants me to do something good, then I think that's what it is going to look like. I will prayerfully do what I can, and somehow by the grace of God, that may lead people to His Kingdom.

RTE: May I ask if there is a young woman in your life?

JOHN: Yes, you can, and there is. A wonderful one.

RTE: What are your professional hopes and plans for the future?

JOHN: I'd like to work professionally in the area around my home for a while. I don't know what's coming, but I'd like to be in movies, do musical theatre, plays, comedy, singing, make people laugh. Anything that matters. This summer I will be working with a professional Equity theatre. I look forward to it.

In both my career and community I want to evangelize. You can go to Kenya and accomplish this, where the people are already deeply human and spiritual, but I think we need more missionaries here in the US. People are dying for real life. I can start here.

RTE: And outside of acting?

JOHN: Raise a family. Live in the woods. Just be human. ✦