

Austin Pendleton

Actors Think Tank

April 28, 2021

Austin Pendleton was a delightful guest on the Actor's Think Tank, Wednesday, 4/28/21. He was so eager to speak with us that he interjected during each slate with personal comments to each actor. Actors Think Tank (ATT) member and student of Pendleton, Jeff Baxt, introduced Austin to the group. Baxt shared that he and Arthur Miller attended the same high school, of course, not at the same time. In the introduction, Baxt shared that Pendleton has been in over 300 films, he is a Broadway Director, a play-wright and acting teacher. Pendleton has performed with the likes of: Tennessee Williams, Meryl Streep, Russell Crowe and many more. He has earned a Tony award, Obie award and Drama Desk award. Pendleton presently teaches drama, which he has done for the past 50 years.

When asked by Rich Henkels, ATT founder, which he takes more pride in, acting or directing, Pendleton said, initially that it was hard to choose, that it is project by project. He then said, if forced to choose, he would choose acting because acting saved his life. He said from childhood until adulthood he stuttered and acting was his escape. Pendleton said he participated in a play at 8 years old in Warren, Ohio that got such applause that it changed his life and acting has been a part of his self-rescue. Pendleton said it was a nightmare playing a stutterer. To help with stuttering he said one can take speech classes, singing and voice lessons, which he did. Pendleton said he went to New York to become a playwright, but got into acting instead. His mother was a professional actor and she influenced him greatly. Pendleton's mom met his dad at a Cleveland play house. She advised Pendleton and was an actor for over 40 years. Pendleton directed his mom in "The Glass Menagerie". As a director he said his mom was a very overbearing. Two directors Pendleton said were very challenging to work with were Jerry Robinson and Otto Preminger, but neither was as tough as his mom.

Henkels asked Pendleton his opinion on actors projecting their views in public places, like the Oscar Awards, and he said he has no problem with it unless it invades the work. Pendleton said well-known people can express their views, as the Oscars have been political since the 1960's. He said Jane Fonda was classy in her award acceptance in the 1970's, just thanking everyone for her award versus becoming political.

On the subject of whether he believes that success is luck, Pendleton said great actors don't always get the breaks. He said he has been incredibly lucky. Pendleton talked about the movie, "My Cousin Vinny", a role he took as a favor to his friend, Jonathan Lynn the movie writer, being good and bad for his career due to the stuttering. Pendleton said he expected the movie to be a cult film, that it would just come and go, but instead it became a favorite movie, however, he was offered stuttering parts for years afterwards. "My Cousin Vinny" offended an entire culture (stutterers). Pendleton said in his next life he would not do the film. He refused, however, to apologize for the movie stating he would offer no apology for his work. Pendleton, however, was touched by a letter received from 11 year old boy named Lucas who was also stutterer. About a year after receiving Lucas' letter Pendleton wrote him an apology letter telling him to have a sense of humor at school and to always talk. Lucas's mom told Pendleton his letter changed her son's life.

Pendleton advises actors to keep working. He has been teaching acting over 50 years and his success in the role of "Three Sisters" tested his range. In future plays Pendleton received harsh reviews. Richard Dreyfus was also in that movie and Richard Dunlap was the director. Julius Caesar was the role he played and Dunlap directed it and dared him to do Shakespeare. Shakespeare was his biggest unsucces. Reviews were hard on Pendleton playing Marc Antony. "Waiting for Godot" at Yale launched his professional career. Samuel Beckett was a great director, very exact director.

After harsh review from Pendleton's role as Mark Antony, Lynn Redgrave advised him not to read the reviews. She said New York is unforgiving of bad reviews and that it would take about seven years before a mainstream role was given to him again, which is what happened. The meeting with Redgrave was transformative professionally for Pendleton, as bad reviews are intended to end an Actor's career. Pendleton said he learned the definition of thick skin and that you must have thick and thin skin. As a teacher, Pendleton said breakthrough of his students is thrilling. Teaching also brought calm to Pendleton and stabilized him. As the director of "A Street Car Named Desire," he addresses each actor's area of strength.

Pendleton starred in "Old Dad Poor Dad", directed by Jerome Robins, who kept calling him back for auditions and each one was less energetic than the first until he and Barbara Harris played opposite each other. They both were cast in the show which ran for a year. Pendleton continued to work with Jerome Robins, later learning that Robins also stuttered as a kid.

The acting world is community, per Pendleton. Embrace it and it embraces you. Community is everything in the acting profession. Actor, Sharon Geller, also attended the Zoom ATT meeting, speaking to Pendleton regarding committed his comedic timing. Pendleton said timing is listening. He said Barbara Streisand was magic on set.

Pendleton's closing feedback to ATT was to never audition to get the job, but rather to do a good job with the material you are given, as well as, that he feels the call back is the audition where you have everything to lose.

Respectfully submitted by,

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