

Accept Imitations: A Beginner's Guide to Impressions

Chapter Four: VIEWPOINT

By Jim Meskimen

If a useful definition of acting is “Knowingly taking on another viewpoint”, then the subject of doing impressions is just another facet of acting, because more than anything else, your performance will live or die on this one point.

No one views the world from exactly the same position in space as anyone else, at the same time. Even the famous Bunker brothers Chang & Eng, the so-called “Siamese Twins” who were co-joined at the chest, had to turn to one another and ask, “Is my tie on straight?”

The thing that makes Bogart, Johnny Carson, Barack Obama, or for that matter Bart Simpson unique and recognizable as voices has as much to do with how they view the world as the frequency of the sound waves they produce in our ears.

Indeed, some child performers or women, whose voices are much higher than those of most adult males, can do a great job of creating impressions of famous men even though their tone is completely inaccurate and would never be mistaken for the real thing.

They do this by sufficiently embodying the character and presenting it to us with whatever sonic ability they have. You are aware they are a young person or a female, but mainly that they are also BEING the person imitated.

It's still quite entertaining.

It might be wise to observe at this point that “Voice” has several meanings, and that one of them could be said to be, the expression of personality. Part of that is how they sound, but that also includes WHAT they would say, based on their own unique viewpoint.

We sometimes hear about the “voice” of an author, for instance, whom we perhaps have never actually heard aloud, but whose opinion and style is nevertheless well known. This is very valuable information: HOW the celebrity sees the world.

How do we find this out? By study and observation. These days that is rather easy to do by making use of the web and the limitless collection of recorded performances of actors and public figures.

Of course, direct and personal contact is the very best and most reliable method. The best mimics of celebrities are, naturally, their former personal assistants, which is precisely why so many famous people require their assistants to have their tongues removed once they leave their employ, and rightly so.

What is done with the tongues of former personal assistants? I have no idea. But I make it a habit never to eat at any deli in Beverly Hills, or if I do, I order the tuna melt.

There is a secret about taking on the viewpoint of the character you are playing, and that is this: it's much easier to do it that way than to simply "imitate". Being the character is a quick and direct way to present the person, and is the only way you can be assured of really achieving a convincing and effective portrayal. This not only applies to celebrity impressions, but doing Shakespeare, Ibsen, Molnar, or a guest spot on "The Suite Life with Zach & Cody."

Try this: walk around your home with the viewpoint of someone you would like to imitate. DON'T say anything, just walk around and look at your surroundings from their point of view. How would they regard your bedroom? What might they think of your furniture? What would draw their interest on your shelves? Would they be bored or interested in your home and possessions?

This is actually the bedrock of your impressions; the sound vibrations they make when they talk are built on THIS fundamental element.

It's also a lot of fun to do and nobody has to even know you are doing it. You can do it in a crowded place, like a party or a concert, or at your job at the Pizza Hut. Just practice looking at the world from the eyes of your subject.

Like I said earlier, it's the most important element of the whole skill, so it's worthwhile spending some time on and will help you develop the raw materiel of your act, when you decide to create one.

The other important point about becoming familiar with the point of view of your subject is that once you know it very well, you can depart from it for comic effect, simply by doing something intentionally that that person would never do or say.

So, it cuts both ways. The key is KNOWING the viewpoint so that you can do what you like with it, either by honoring it exactly as to intention, or departing from it entirely for laughs, or some other brilliant use that I haven't stumbled on yet.

The End