

EPISODE #005 EMOTION IN ACTING (Transcript)

Charlie Sandlan (00:02):

And hello, everybody. This is Charlie Sandlan, and today we are going to talk about an area of acting that gives most actors a great deal of anxiety. And that's emotion. Most actors do not know how to access it within themselves in an organic way. Many actors will fake it, and most actors will try to squeeze it out of themselves, like getting lemon juice from a lemon. So let's demystify emotion and where it belongs in acting. It is certainly important to have if you want to illuminate anything about the human condition. So put the phone back in your pocket. Creating Behavior starts now.

Charlie Sandlan (00:45):

(Theme song/Not Enough by Lawrence Trailer)

Charlie Sandlan (01:11):

And hello, my fellow daydreamers. My name is Charlie Sandlan. This is Creating Behavior, and listen, I want to thank you for listening and sticking with me today. We'll get into the episode here, but first, I guess I'll just update you. At the time of this recording, we're still in fucking Guatemala and I don't really have too much else to report right now. I am recording as many episodes as I can down here, so these first five, probably six, seven episodes are going to be recorded down here so that I can get ahead of the curve. Because when I go back it's going to be busy, I'll tell you. We got to deal with all the life shit that we've been putting off for the last nine weeks. The apartment, the business, where we're going to live, all of the things that all of you have been struggling with, right?

Charlie Sandlan (02:02):

All of these big decisions that we're all being faced with and everything that goes into that. So I don't really have anything new

to report other than I still miss my dog. My studio manager, Katie Healy is staying in our apartment now and so we did a little FaceTime with Wally the other night. And I call out to him, I'm like, "Wally! Walter!" And he stops and he looks at the phone and then he looks at the door and he looks back at the phone and his head tilts off to the side. And it is the cutest thing. It's the saddest thing. And then he realizes that he's being fucked with, and that was not cool. And then you could just see kind of the depression roll over his poor little face. And then he just goes over to Katie's lap and puts his head on her leg.

Charlie Sandlan (02:51):

And then I feel even worse, but it was good to see him and Trish and I just sat there with our phone and just watched him lay on Katie. So, yeah, I cannot wait to get back to him. And Mia, the evil cat, not so much, but she's still alive. She's still thriving. And I will have to tell you, I just hope and I'm glad that so far that cat has not died while we're down here, because she's 19-years-old, and God forbid that she passes away when Trish is not there. It would just be really tragic. And when I say tragic, I mean tragic for myself, because I'm going to be the one that's going to have to pick up the broken pieces. And so, of course, I like to make it about me and I'm sure Trish will love hearing that, but, that's where we're at.

Charlie Sandlan (03:50):

So, let's talk about emotion, all right, and its place in acting. Shall we? Now, when I decided that I was going to do this episode on emotion, I did something that I never do and I don't do it because it just pisses me the fuck off. I went online to see what junk is being peddled out there for actors to consume. So I type in, "Emotion in acting." Dear Google. And the crap that came up, it was unbelievable to me. So I just started watching some videos. I just started watching these people that are offering their insight

and their expertise to anybody that wants to listen to it. And this is why the state of American acting is so mediocre. Because there's no doubt in my mind, there are many, many, many, many thousands of people that, like one of the actors are pursuing some sort of career and so they try to cobble together some education off of the internet and they start watching videos.

Charlie Sandlan (05:11):

And so I clicked on a video, and I'm not going to say who it was. I'm not going to say where it was from. I will just say that it was part of this, I don't know, I guess you would call it a YouTube Academy that I guess was offering all of these different videos to actors that wanted to educate themselves. I'm doing air quotes right now as I say that. So I watched this one video. It was about seven, eight minutes long. I don't know. The kid was probably 23, 24-years-old, at best. And he proceeds to talk for about seven minutes on how to do emotion, how to show it, how to pull it from all of these parts of yourself so that you be emotional. And I swear to God, it got me so irritated, so upset, so offended, because that's really what happens. It offends my artistic core that I just had to turn it off. And, I really, I refused to watch anything else. I couldn't do it.

Charlie Sandlan (06:20):

So, listen, there is a big misconception that actors have as it pertains to emotion. Let's start with the basic fundamental, the definition of acting, and I know I've mentioned this before. Stanislavski talked about it the first time, Meisner, certainly, everything that he created in his technique, Strasberg, everybody. Everybody understands that acting is doing. That's the definition of acting. The ability to do truthfully under an imaginary circumstance. Anything that happens to you as a byproduct of truthfully doing, that's great. But the first thing you have to learn how to do is how to really truthfully do.

Charlie Sandlan (07:08):

But a lot of actors think that acting is feeling. It's how much emotion you can show. But I will promise you this, whether you feel anything or not, you still have to walk on that stage eight times a week and do the fucking show. Whether you feel anything or not, you are still going to have to go on that set and do five, 10, 20, 30 takes, whether you feel anything or you don't. So you cannot rest your acting on feeling. Now, that being said, emotion is good to have, especially if you are playing complicated characters, recurring spots, guest spots, series regulars, major roles in the theater. If you want to be able to illuminate what the playwright or the screenwriter has written there, then yes, you do need emotion. It's what gives you dimension. It's what gives you size. It's what allows you really to illuminate the human condition, right?

Charlie Sandlan (08:15):

So, it is important. But I just think it needs to be understood in a more fully realized way. Now in life, all of us, I think this is true for all of us, we do everything we can not to feel, right? We try to keep our shit together. We try to keep everything tightly wound. We don't want to embarrass ourselves. I mean, who wants to feel humiliation or heartbreak or grief or who wants to really... is even comfortable with their anger and their rage? So we go through life trying not to feel. But, somehow, if you want to be an actor, God damn, do you want to feel? Do you want to be alive? And you want to make sure everybody fucking sees it, right?

Charlie Sandlan (09:06):

"I want you to see. Look at my tears. Look at me. I'm alive. I'm cooking." And it oftentimes is unwatchable for many reasons. Either you're too tense or it's not flowing in an easy way within you, which all has to do with your physical instrument and how you train your voice and how you train your body. And that is

important because the quality of your emotional life is what is the most important thing. Which means that emotion needs to ebb and flow inside of you. The mark of a really good actor is the fluidity of their emotional life, so that emotion is like water being poured in and out of a vase. It's easy. It's fluid. It's not rigid. It's not held. It's not forced, because we don't do that in life. So how do you do that? How do you get comfortable, not just accessing your emotion, but being okay with whatever it is that you have?

Charlie Sandlan (10:27):

Now, there are three ways that you can come to life as an actor, and when I talk about emotion, certainly in my classroom and when I'm coaching and I'm dealing with actors, I use the term, coming to life because I don't ever want actors to think that they have to be emotional. But you can come to life. And there are three ways. I'm going to give them to you right now.

Charlie Sandlan (10:57):

The first way that you can come to life as an actor is by working off another human being. And certainly the technique that I have been teaching for the last almost 20 years, the Meisner technique, that is the first thing that you learn how to do, is how to come to life by really listening, really taking personally what's being said to you. And if you work off of another actor, another human being from moment to moment to moment, and you take it personally, something will happen to you. You can be moved, you can be played upon and you can be changed. You can be hurt. You can be overjoyed. You can be devastated, depending on the contact you have with another. So, that's the first way, working off another human being.

Charlie Sandlan (11:50):

The second way that you can come to life as an actor is by really doing. In the early part of Meisner's work, and I guess any really

good training program whether it's Stanislavski based or you're working with Uta Hagen's approach to actor training, it all has to be rooted in doing. And if you really truthfully do, you can come to life if what you're doing is important. And there's other homework that would go into that, right? Your ability to craft and how specific and how personal all of that is when you load something in. And this also even just goes forward into what actions are, which I'm sure I will do a whole episode or two on actions because that is really the clay of behavior, if your ability to really do. So if you do, the by-product of really truthfully doing can be an emotional response.

Charlie Sandlan (12:52):

And the third way, which is a very delicate part of the actor's craft, is emotional preparation. And emotional preparation really is what an actor does off stage, off camera, in order to emotionally relate to the previous circumstance of the scene. It is self-induced emotion, so that means like you're off stage getting ready to go on, or you're 10 minutes before action and you're off camera and you're trying to emotionally get yourself where you need to be when you hear action, because it's a scene that requires you to be fully emotionally alive at the top of the scene. And you can actually learn how to do this in the first year of Meisner's work and his training. We spend a good two months learning how to do this. And I think the healthiest way to do this is by harnessing your ability to daydream and fantasize to your craft as an actor. You understand this, right, in life?

Charlie Sandlan (14:05):

If you have a very vivid and you're lost and a very vivid daydream, the most, I guess, the obvious would be the sexual daydream, which I will not go into. But, if you get lost at a very vivid daydream, there is an emotional response to that because the body, the nervous system, does not know the difference between

reality and fantasy. So if you can learn how to take something that you really already do naturally as a human being, daydream and fantasize, and harness that to your craft as an actor, you've got a real solid way of working, so that you can alter your inner life before you walk on stage or before you enter the shot.

Charlie Sandlan (14:51):

Now, the trap that so many actors fall into is that they put their attention on their emotional life. They are worried and they anticipate where they think they need to be emotionally in a given scene. They go, "Uh-oh, here comes this beat. I know I need to be angry." They read a line in a script that the other person says to you, "I can't believe you're so upset." And so the actor goes, "Oh, fuck. I have to be upset there." And so what most actors do is they try to manipulate themselves from moment to moment to adjust to wherever they think they need to be feeling in a given moment. I call that adjusting to the text. It's really bad, kind of high school, undergrad kind of acting.

Charlie Sandlan (15:44):

When you have your attention on your emotional life, you are fundamentally just off as an actor. One of the important fundamentals of acting is your placement of concentration. And the one place that it should never be is on yourself. Really good actors, and they understand this, they understand this instinctively or because they've trained themselves, that they are not important. It is not about me. It is not about how I feel. It's not about what I'm trying to show an audience. It's about the other person. So in acting, you're always connected to an acting object, as I call it, and it's either the other person or what you're doing. And when your placement of concentration is on yourself, that's when you run the risk and you end up becoming self-indulgent, you start worrying about results, you start working and pushing to try to feel something.

Charlie Sandlan (16:43):

You see it all the time when you go to the theater, when you go and you watch a film on TV, actors that are trying to show you that they're alive. It's really amateurish. What you need is not only to have access to the full gamut of the human emotional experience, but it needs to process in a body that is fluid and pliable and capable of processing emotion. Most actors are tense, meaning they're angry, they're upset. And in life, emotion can tense us. When you see it, actors, it looks like their veins are popping out of their neck. They turn two shades of red. The veins on their temples are pulsating or they're crying and their face contorts and they look like a rotted prune. The audience is not going to feel anything when they're watching actors like that.

Charlie Sandlan (17:50):

An audience is only going to experience what the actors are experiencing, and if the actor is tense and locked up, then that's what the audience is going to experience. Your tension. And so a great deal of the work that goes into being emotionally accessible has to do with, A) chiseling away all of the defenses that you've acquired so that you're open and vulnerable, that you can be played upon, kind of plucked like the harp strings of a harp, right? And you need a voice that's resonant and open and clear so that when you do come to life, when you become angry and upset, that your voice doesn't go up too octaves, "Which can happen when you get upset and you don't know what came over you, and I can't talk." You know, you can't watch that. It's uncomfortable.

Charlie Sandlan (18:44):

You want to be fully alive in that face and that body to just be at ease. That is when you will move an audience. That's what the greats can do. That's what Meryl Streep can do and Toni Collette and Cate Blanchett and Jeffrey Wright and Daniel Day-Lewis. All

these really good, great actors. They can do that, but that takes a hell of a lot of work. A hell of a lot of work. And this leads me to, I mean, I guess, and I'll call them acting-teacher cliches. These are things that I think a lot of acting teachers say to their students.

Charlie Sandlan (19:29):

I mean, but they're also true, and I think the first thing that will help you is to understand that you are enough. That you've got to be okay with whatever you have going on inside of you and not worried about the quantity of what it is you've got going on because there are going to be times where you don't feel anything. Where you're not alive. And you're going to feel this pressure to try to manufacture something. Listen, if you're not alive, you're not alive, but you can really still truthfully do. You can be grounded in a truthful reality and still listen and answer and respond. And you might not be as alive as you were last night or two takes ago, but you'll have something and you've got to be okay with that. And that is a really hard thing to learn as an actor. That you're enough. The thing about young actors, and when I mean young actors, it's actors that are starting out in their career, they work a hell of a lot harder than they need to.

Charlie Sandlan (20:39):

And there's this burden of, "Okay, now I'm acting, and so I've got to try to live up to the material. I've got to act." And so you act. And it looks like you're acting. But acting is effortless. And that really takes not just a great deal of really good training, but it takes years and years of work on yourself, of work on your craft, to get to a place where you don't do anything more or anything less than you need to do. And being okay with whatever is going on inside of you. That's hard, especially when you get a piece of material where you're reading the scene and all of a sudden, right there in the middle of page one, there's this huge moment. A beat change, because most beat changes in a script are emotional.

And you read the script and it's, "Oh my God, the phone rings and I'm finding out that my wife was just killed in a car accident while she was going to get ice cream for the kid's birthday party," let's say.

Charlie Sandlan (21:54):

Or you're in the middle of your, I don't know, 10 year wedding anniversary dinner with your husband and in the middle of the scene he asks for a divorce. And you know as the actor that you are supposed to have some sort of emotional response there, right? There's no way around it. This is a pivotal moment. And certainly, excuse me, when you start auditioning for bigger things, the recurring roles, the guest spots, the major parts, and the material starts getting more dynamic, you're going to get material like this. And most actors don't know what to do with it. They know, "Shit, I need to feel something here," and they'll worry and fret, and they'll anticipate, and they'll be looking down the road, and then they'll try to squeeze or force or indicate whatever it is they think they need.

Charlie Sandlan (22:55):

And there are a lot of really decent actors. I'm not going to say that they're good, but a lot of decent actors that are really good indicators, that they know how to indicate emotion. They know how to indicate what needs to be done, because oftentimes a director would rather work with an actor who can at least indicate what I need to be indicated. Like at least you can help me tell my story as opposed to an actor that might be really truthful and really listening, but not doing anything or have anything going on inside of them. So it's a complicated, frustrating thing. So as an actor you look at that moment and you go, "Well, shit." Honestly, this is where training needs to go into, something like that, so that you know how to implant meaning to moments.

Charlie Sandlan (23:48):

Like it's homework that you're doing so when that moment happens, it's almost like Pavlov's dog. When that bell rings, something's going to happen to you. And that just takes work. Certainly in my classroom, that takes months and months of work to teach actors how to organically implant meanings so that when a moment unfolds and happens in a script, you have the emotional response that's needed. Now, how big that emotion is, and I hate to use that word, "big," I never, ever, ever use that word when I'm talking and training actors, because it puts this connotation, almost this result to something. Well, it's not big enough. I think you need to be an actor that is worried about how rich my behavior is. How rich and how deep my connection to the material is, to the character, to the issues. So rather than ever thinking about how big my emotional life is, think about how deep and how rich it is.

Charlie Sandlan (24:56):

But this takes work. It takes a lot of work, a lot of hard work on yourself. Because, ultimately, if this is your life, if this is what you're doing for the next 20, 30, 40, 50 years, then you need to become a master of talking about and working with emotion. It needs to be something that you're very facile and very insightful with. And you have to be able to talk about emotion in a way that's actable. It's about thinking essentially. Excuse me, Jesus. Being able to talk about anger, let's just say, because that's really the most primal human emotion. It's oftentimes the most superficial emotional response, it's kind of the go-to for a lot of actors, their anger. How many times have you gone to the theater and just watched actors shouting at each other? It's unbearable. Do you know what I mean?

Charlie Sandlan (26:01):

But there are different levels to anger. There are different levels to heartbreak, to your joy, and being able to work with it, to be able to be very facile and fluid. That's what really good actors aspire to. And so I hope that's something that you're going to work on. Keep it in mind. And, honestly, to tell you the truth, you're going to have to really work on your instrument if you want all of the things that I'm talking about to become second nature in you, so that when you do get on set, when you do get onstage and you're cooking with a bunch of other actors on stage, that you are able to be out of your head, put your attention on the other person and go from unanticipated moment to unanticipated moment. So, that's my two cents on emotion.

Charlie Sandlan (27:04):

Now let's shift gears and head into directors and filmmakers that Charlie thinks you should know.

Charlie Sandlan (27:20):

Okay. So last week I believe I made a film suggestion for all of you, a François Truffaut film called Jules and Jim. And, listen, I think that educating yourself about the history of the art form that you want to partake is really important. Directors, other actors, they talk, they think cinematically, they think in terms of films and filmmakers, and particular shots, and particular moments. And François Truffaut is a director that you absolutely should know. He came out of what we now call the French New Wave, which if you don't know anything about it, you should know. Came out in the early '60s, and it involved a number of directors that really for the first time were identifying themselves as artists, as auteurs, really.

Charlie Sandlan (28:20):

Directors that wanted to have complete autonomy and control over their art. They started to look and view their camera the way a writer would view their typewriter or a painter would handle their

canvas and their brushes. Some really great directors. Jacques Demy, Alain Resnais, who had a really great film called Night and Fog, if you want to watch some more films from this era. Louis Malle, Jean-Luc Godard, certainly a director that you should be familiar with. You should watch his film Breathless. And then of course, François Truffaut who made this film, Jules and Jim, in 1962, that really crossed a lot of boundaries. The subject matter itself. Do you know what we're really talking about is almost a ménage à trois, at least emotionally.

Charlie Sandlan (29:18):

These two men who are very, very good friends and fall in love with the same woman. A lot of people also talk about the underlying latent homosexual undertones between Jules and Jim, which if you watch the film you might be able to see for yourself. But what he was doing, the way he was telling the story, the way he was using voiceover and jump cuts, and a lot of what we now take for granted, the way filmmakers work, was groundbreaking at the time. His use of deep focus, his incredibly long takes, which all of these directors at the time were starting to use, has influenced, my God, everybody from Arthur Penn to Scorsese to Tarantino. It influenced films like Bonnie and Clyde and Thelma and Louise.

Charlie Sandlan (30:17):

I will finish off with a quote from François Truffaut. I do love my quotes as my students know, and here it is. This is what he had to say about his life. "Three films a day, three books a week, and records of great music would be enough to make me happy to the day I die." And that was, films and directors Charlie thinks you should know.

Charlie Sandlan (30:58):

Okay, we're getting ready to wrap up the show today. But before we do, I want to give you a book recommendation. Something that I think you should add to your library, a book that I think applies to all artists. The kind of book that you keep next to your bed on your nightstand and you pull out every once in a while when you need some inspiration. It's called Letters to a Young Poet by Rainer Maria Rilke. And if you don't know who Rilke was, R-I-L-K-E, Rilke was a very famous, very important German poet. At the turn of the 20th century he was already very well known, a very well-respected artist.

Charlie Sandlan (31:45):

At the age of 27 he found himself in a correspondence with a young aspiring poet, and what this book is really is a collection of 11 letters that Rilke wrote to this young man, Mr. Kappus. What's astonishing is that this guy was only 27-years-old, and these letters... It's a very thin book so it's the kind of thing that you can pull out and read a letter here or read a paragraph there. What he has to say about the artistic process, what he has to say about life, about solitude, about finding and searching and waiting for inspiration, about not searching for the answers themselves but really living the questions, to paraphrase one of his more famous quotes from that book, is a source of inspiration not just for writers but for all artists, and I think particularly for actors. It might resonate with you.

Charlie Sandlan (32:47):

So please, pick it up. Letters to a Young Poet, Rainer Maria Rilke. Okay, everybody, I want to thank you for keeping that phone in your pocket, not pulling it out. I love talking to you, guys. This has become something that I have really started to truly enjoy. So, thank you, Lawrence Trailer for the music. Please subscribe to this show on any of the platforms that you are listening to it. You can find out everything you need to know about the artists, the art,

anything I've mentioned in any of our episodes, go to Creating Behavior podcast. Email me, charlie@creatingbehaviorpodcast.com for any of your questions, comments.

Charlie Sandlan (33:31):

We are still in trying times. I want you to stay resilient, play full out with yourself when you can, and for fuck's sake, don't ever, ever settle for your second best. My name is Charlie Sandlan. This is Creating Behavior. Peace.

Charlie Sandlan (33:48):

(music by Lawrence Trailer)