



## INSIDER'S POINT OF VIEW—ACTING



## David Morse

# Always Working, Always Memorable

My first response to the discussion I had with David Morse about the craft of acting—and acting for the camera—is that he is a solid, strong, sensitive, serious, thoughtful, truthful and humble artist.

**By Colleen Patrick**

I thought, “No wonder everyone wants him in their quality projects as an actor and to work with him as a person.”

Mind you, we’re nowhere near BFF (Best Friends Forever), and it was my first encounter with him—but he impressed me as someone who reserves any ego trips for the characters he plays who may take ego trips; as a down-to-earth family man who happens to be extraordinarily talented, highly skilled and by choice terrifically trained.

More, I felt that although he is grateful for the impressive opportunities he’s had—and continues to have—working in his beloved acting profession, he also grieves and is sickened by the decline of integrity in the film and commercial television industry. He told me he considers the business, “Mean, mean, mean.”

I asked if he believes the source of that meanness is greed.

He drew a long breath, as if to regretfully but honestly respond in a near whisper, “Yes.”

And Morse is a person who would know first hand about changes in the business, because he has worked constantly and consistently in memorable award-winning roles for the camera and theatre for more than 30 years.

Most recently, the ubiquitous American actor has been seen in the sleeper hit *Disturbia*, alongside Shia LaBeouf and Carrie-Anne Moss, and the widely deliberated indie *Hounddog*, featured in competition at the 2007 Sundance Film Festival, with Dakota Fanning and Robin Wright Penn.

He has two projects coming out soon: the feature film drama *Passengers*, the story of a surviving plane crash passenger who works through his denial of the event with a grief counselor; and he portrays George Washington in the new HBO mini-series *John Adams*, which reviews the first 50 years of the United States of America through the life of the second U.S. President. The renowned American actor Paul Giamatti portrays Adams, and the

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uber-talented Laura Linney his remarkable out-spoken wife, Abigail.

Morse was nominated for the Independent Spirit Award for Best Supporting Male for his performance as John Booth in writer/director Sean Penn's 1995 indie drama *The Crossing Guard*.

Other significant films in which he has enjoyed memorable roles include *Inside Moves*, *Personal Foul*, *The Indian Runner*, *The Good Son*, *12 Monkeys*, *The Rock*, *Contact*, *The Negotiator*, *The Green Mile* (SAG nomination for Outstanding Cast Performance), *Proof Of Life*, *Hearts In Atlantis*, *The Slaughter Rule*, and *Dancer In The Dark*—Lars von Trier's musical drama co-starring Björk and Catherine

Acting was the only way I got through school; it helped me make it through the rest of what was going on. It was amazing that I graduated, but I did. I discovered the acting program and it was wonderful. I had an amazing drama teacher and coach. He made all the difference to my life. I found something that could hold my attention, that I really loved and that I could learn from. My drama teacher was the best. I was very lucky. In comparison, so many of the school drama programs today—even in private schools—don't have the same substance, the same quality. I wish they did. Then a friend of mine invited me to audition for the Boston Repertory Company before I graduated. I did, and amazingly, they accepted me. I worked on

**finger, or did you let him have a broken finger as well?**

I didn't respond like my finger was broken. I stayed in character as if the finger was fine.

**I understand. There are times when we make everything that happens in real life during a performance serve the character, and other times when we must stay so strictly in character that we know what's going on in real life would never happen to or with the character.**

Right.

**What's the most important advice you can give actors breaking into camera work?**

## “No matter what the circumstances or the place or what's actually going on, you have to come through, make that character come to life. No matter what.”

Deneuve, which won the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival.

Morse's career started in theatre where his dedication and love for performing on the boards continues.

From Seattle to Boston to Broadway to Los Angeles, Morse has tripped the footlights fantastic, starring in the Seattle Rep world premiere presentation of *Redwood Curtain*, and performing in more than 30 productions from 1971 to 1977 with the Boston Repertory Company. He debuted on Broadway as Father Barry who provides the moral compass in *On The Waterfront*.

He won the Drama League Award, the Lucille Lortel Award, the Drama Desk Award and the OBIE Award for his starring role in the Pulitzer Prize-winning off-Broadway production of *How I Learned To Drive*. For his performance in the Los Angeles production of *Of Mice And Men*, he won Drama-Logue and L.A. Weekly awards.

Morse received his first mass audience exposure as young Dr. Jack “Boomer” Morrison in the Emmy®-winning ensemble television drama *St. Elsewhere*. Last fall he guest-starred in an outstanding six-episode arc of the eminent drama series *House M.D.* He played the vengeful Michael Tritter, a cop unduly humiliated by Dr. House, who sets out to crush the arrogant doctor for verbally abusing him.

Not only has he starred in his own CBS drama series, *Hack* (currently airing in Australia), where he worked with Andre Braugher, but he has also carried more than a dozen films for television.

This guy has really been around—he even starred in a short-lived CBS sitcom, *Big Wave Dave's* (never say I don't help your Trivial Pursuit game!)

At six-feet, four-inches tall (1.90 meters), the Massachusetts-born Morse is soft-spoken, and strikes me as someone who knows who he is, knows what works and what doesn't, and understands how to make it all function much better if anyone ever asks.

**What attracted you to acting—to become a professional actor?**

some 30 productions there before I moved to New York.

**What do you like most about acting for the camera?**

What I like about acting—well, acting, period. It's about something bigger than ourselves. The attention is on other people. It's about making those characters come to life. Creating another real life in a character. Having respect for the character, letting him take over. Give him an ego.

**I tell my actors to have enough respect for their characters to let them have his or her own soul.**

That's good. Yes, definitely. It's got nothing to do with me. I have to get out of the way and let the character go. It's about interacting with others, with other actors, with other characters as well.

**Yet there're many times when you're expected to perform for the camera as if you're in a scene with someone, but there's actually no one there. You're either looking into the camera—making the camera the other character, or you're looking at an eye line (*Editor's Note: a mark or a spot at which you're supposed to look as if they are someone or something that isn't really there*).**

That's true, but you still have to bring life to your character and the other character in that case. That's your job. No matter what the circumstances or the place or what's actually going on, you have to come through, make that character come to life. No matter what. Really, no matter what—it's just part of the work.

**Did you really break several fingers when you were shooting a fight scene in *Disturbia*?**

I broke one finger. However, that was nothing compared to what I went through on another film—I broke my hand just before we started shooting, so I worked through the whole shoot with a broken hand. (*Editor's Note: which wasn't treated!*) I just couldn't see the character in a cast.

**Ouch! When you broke your finger, did you remain in character as if he didn't break a**

Do theatre. Not for the reasons you might think. Really know what the experience is to take a character through an *entire* story. In film, you're all over the place when you're shooting. The most emotional or difficult scene, or scenes, are shot first. Plus, you've barely met the people you're working with—everybody's new to the set. Then you go from there to wherever—wherever they want you to go in the life of the character. Everything's shot out of sequence. In theatre, you take a character from the beginning to the end. You live that life one step at a time during the performance of the play. You get a real sense of what it's like to take that character through a complete lifetime, or the lifetime that takes place during the play and see the whole world of that character. You get to understand you're playing a whole person going through a complete story during that particular time of a whole life. That way, when you start working in films, where they break up the sequence, you start with the experience of playing someone from beginning to end—of being familiar with seeing a character's whole experience, then you can adapt to where the character is in the story when they shoot it out of sequence. You know, in film scripts, too often the actors are just there purely for the plot. The script may not have any, or much, character development, so it's up to you to bring all your talent and skills to the performance and bring the character to life. It's all up to my imagination to make him and the situation real.

**What is the camera work of which you're most proud?**

(Thoughtful Beat) I'd have to say working with Sean Penn in *The Crossing Guard*. I love Sean and working with Sean to begin with, but this was a rare and extraordinary experience. He included me and the other actors in the whole process. Like the development of the characters and the story, which gave it such incredible depth and complexity. It contributed so much to our performances. It took five years to put the film together, but it was definitely one of the most enjoyable working experiences I've had in my life. (*Editor's Note: In *The Crossing Guard*, Morse portrays John Booth,*



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a drunken driver who killed the daughter of Freddy Gale—played by Jack Nicholson—in a hit and run accident. Gale’s life spirals downward because of the hatred he holds for Booth. Gale lives for the day he can murder his daughter’s killer. Convicted of vehicular homicide, Booth is sentenced to six years in jail. Like Gale, the man who emerges from state-imposed prison is a completely changed person. Only while Gale incarcerated himself in hatred and lost his soul from the tragedy, Booth chose to find his soul and humanity, seeking redemption from his devastating deed.) Clint Eastwood is another director whose techniques working with actors I really admire.

**There’re so many—especially new—directors now who are so technically oriented they don’t know how to work with actors. They seem to be almost afraid of actors. What advice would you have for them?**

I worked with one of them. Only when he worked with me, he decided to change all that and actually shot the film himself with a hand held camera and made himself part of the scenes. Lars von Trier used to be so afraid of talking with his actors he would actually have someone else do it for him. But, when he cast me in *Dancer In The Dark*, he was right there with us, experiencing the scenes with us, shooting the film himself, after coming from *Dogme 95*. It helped him overcome his fear of actors and to understand what we were going through instead of using them as pawns for his vision. I’m not saying that directors need to go as far as he did—being part of the

scenes—but I wish directors who are so technically oriented or who don’t seem to know how to talk to us would learn. Maybe take an acting class or work with a coach or something, that would help them understand how to relate with us better. As it is, so many of them, when they try to direct us, they seem to have a clumsy, ignorant way of dealing with us. I do as much as I can to assist in whatever way I can, and of course I do all my homework so I can show up with someone I can bring to life and feel good about my work. However, it would help if they did something to understand how to communicate with us better—in a way that could enhance their vision through us. The more they can understand acting, the ephemeral nature of our work, having to be in the moment, what we need to prepare properly, and how to get out of our way. That’s what I love about working with Sean; I have to say he’s my favorite director. He didn’t interfere with our work, he helped us enhance it. Eastwood is someone else who understands how to work with actors.

**What is the most helpful advice you’ve ever received?**

Work with Bill Esper! An actress I worked with in Boston recommended I see Bill, so I went to New York to see him. Mind you, I had already been making a living as a theatre actor for six years, so I figured I knew what I was doing. After talking with Bill, he told me to quit acting and just study with him for two years. Two years. He said the time would feel like it was dragging on forever sometimes, and other



times it would just fly by. That it would be the best two years of my life. He was right. I've reaped the rewards of that work ever since.

#### Where do you find your inspiration?

Honestly? Everywhere. Sometimes it's just the need to feed my family, but... (Uncomfortable Beat) you know, it's almost impossible to answer this question without sounding corny or sentimental or clichéd. But... I do find inspiration everywhere. In my family. In so-called ordinary people. In nature. Seeing other actors do something I admire or want to do or wish I could do. Seeing someone who's up-and-coming—who nobody knows—do something that I think is fantastic. That I haven't seen before. It may be the only great thing they do in their performance—or maybe their career, but it still inspires me because I admire what they've done. Reading books. Seeing the work of other artists. My mother is one of my major inspirations. She is always lighting the way. My high school drama teacher. It's the little things that affect me. That inspire me. They're all around. Look for them. They're everywhere.

#### What do you do to prepare?

In so many cases, I'm called Thursday to start work Monday, so there's often so little time to prepare properly, as I want to. But I still learn as much as I can about the character. Background. Motivation. Find the respect for him that he deserves. I bring myself as far out of him as I can. I want to serve the character, not myself. I'm there for him, not for me. What are his inside moves, as well as the way he walks and shows the world. How can I serve him completely, stay with him in the moments he has to live through me. On the HBO series *John Adams*, I play George Washington. This is a remarkable man. I have to know so much about him—I have to immerse myself in everything possible about him to let go of me and serve him. It's all about him, not me. Here's something that made a difference to me for preparing: I go to the set where I'm supposed to perform when no one else is around. So I went to the set that was supposed to be my room. The art director and set designer did something I'll always remember. I looked at the walls, and touched them. This was supposed to be an old room. And there were places where the wall had been chipped enough to expose the history. There were layers of paint and wallpaper—several deep—that showed the layers of history of that room. It may have "only" been a set, but those artists brought it to life by giving it a history, by giving it layers of life over the years. I could just imagine what caused the people who lived there to change the walls—paint it or wallpaper it. And they didn't remove what was already there. Just like we can't take away the layers of our lives we keep adding. Different colors, different textures, different tastes. It's the same with character.

#### There are a lot of talented actors out there who are fearful of getting out there and doing what they know they love. What advice would you give them?

Seriously. If you're scared don't become a professional actor. This industry is too hard. I wish the joy of being an actor on everyone. I love acting and actors. But I don't wish the



business on anyone. It's so hard. It's mean, mean, mean.

#### Meanness caused by greed?

Yes. It's so sad to see so many people used up. Even someone who has had success. In the music industry as well. So many people suffer. If acting makes you happy, stick with

community or neighborhood theatres, school theatre. Get the satisfaction of doing the work, but the business ... whatever you do, hold on to your craft.

#### Mr. Morse, thank you so much for your time and your thoughts.

You're welcome. ■

## DAVID MORSE'S FRIEND BILL

"Bill" Esper, the beloved acting coach whom David Morse credits with enhancing and contributing so much quality to his life and his art, is better known to the world as William Esper.

He worked with Sanford Meisner for 17 years and founded the William Esper Studio of Professional Acting Training in New York City in 1965.

For the second year in a row, Esper was voted the Best Acting Teacher in New York City this year.

In 1977 Esper founded the MFA and BFA Professional Actor Training Programs at Rutgers University in New Jersey.

His studio is dedicated to the work of Meisner and his own teaching; it adheres to the principal that "acting is a creative art and true excellence in its practice may only be achieved through total mastery of the technical craft."

He has a new book coming out soon, *Esper On Meisner*, which will be in stores in the fall of 2007.

The school is not for the faint of heart. If you're interested, know that "Students must be capable of working with a distinguished group of dedicated teachers who expect their classes to strive for the highest artistic standards."