



Notes For Actors

Lift your game with Miranda Harcourt

By Miranda Harcourt Over 1,000 subscribers

GIFTS

Gifts are a gift to the giver...

JUN 2 • MIRANDA HARCOURT



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Gifts are a gift to the giver...



MIRANDA HARCOURT

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Here's a simple exercise that really pays off for actors and for characters.

As a rehearsal-coach I have often suggested this to actors in their preparation. And this week my student [Emily Swain](#) in the UK emailed me with this set of photos and a story about how effective the exercise was for her.

The exercise is called GIFTS and the value lies in how you are invited to spend time thinking about 2 sets of relationships — the one between you and your partner-actor and also the one between the characters you are playing. Here's how Emily describes it. Thank you to Emily and Rory and their director Ryan Ling for allowing me to share this story.

EMILY'S STORY

“This exercise brought me right back to source-work Miranda.

I was cast in a short film about a young man coming home to his widowed mother 2 years after his father's death. The story is about their separate grieving, abandonment, disconnect & the start of finding a way back to each other through pain, anger and betrayal.

So to the GIFT. I play the mum, Rachel. My son Connell is played by [Rory Alexander](#). I decided I would give Connell a gift, jumping back through time so that the gift was from his mother Rachel (me) and his father, Christopher who appears only in flashbacks.

So before we met to rehearse and shoot, I went to the nearby charity shop. I was looking for a book about nature — her cycles of life and death — perhaps the forest, wildlife — something that would have been a birthday gift to our son in his teenage years.

I came upon a book called HIS FOR HAWK on the shelf. I had never read it but I didn't overthink it and grabbed it since the contents felt right.

We shot in a huge house and me and Rory had lovely rooms to stay in, at the top of the house.

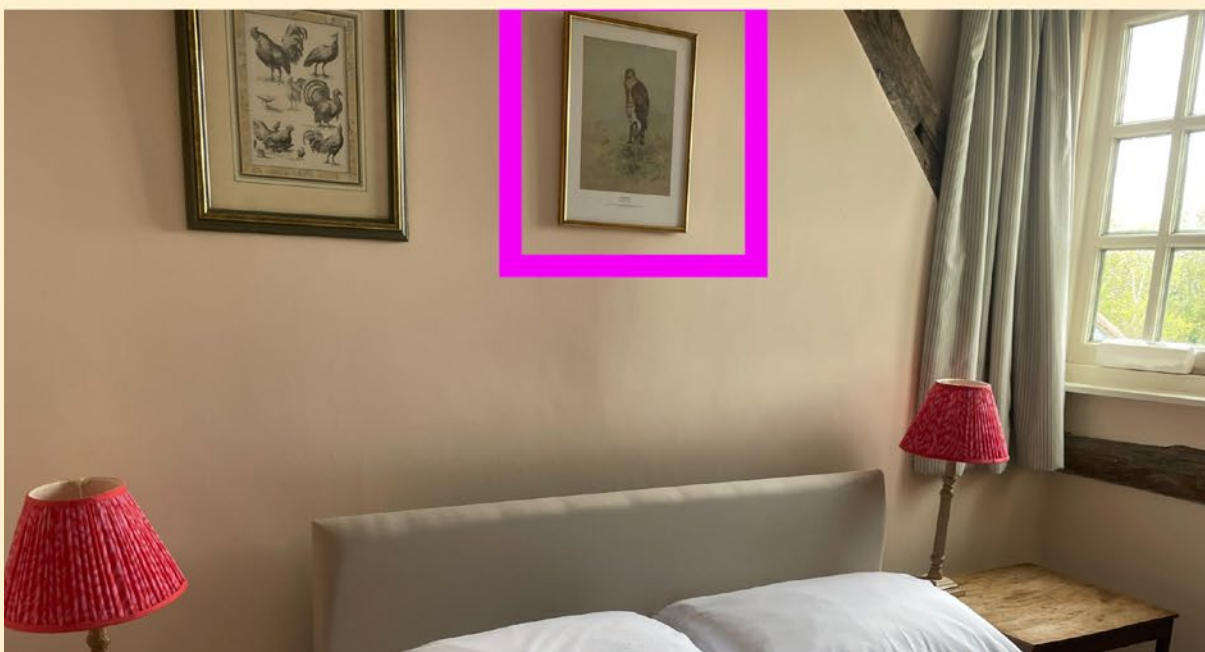
So I wrapped up the book and the night before the shoot I gave it to my (son) Connell — I left it on his bed.

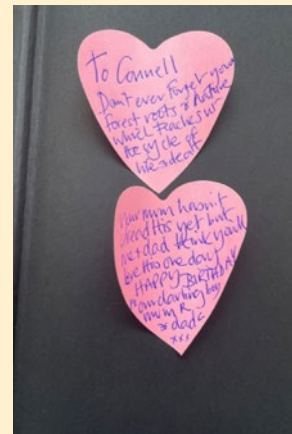
As it turns out, the book is actually about a woman raising a goshawk as she grieves her father's death. So perfect for our film and our relationship.

What is more, a spare room on the same floor in the location was designated as the bedroom of the dying father for flashback scenes and where mum/me, Rachel/Emily had afterwards stored and put away all of the dad's things.

I visited the room as we have discussed in class. I touched the walls, saying hello to the room, creating ownership and a history... and guess what was there ready to greet me, hanging above the bed in this room? A print of a GOSHAWK... just like on the cover of the book, goosebumps. And when they set-dressed they kept it there.

I showed actor Rory. He was very quiet.





It was such a seminal moment for me... So GIFTS are important and are a GIFT to the GIVER in unexpected and stunning ways.

This detail of gift-giving on this project and the way it so beautifully played out gave me confidence that loving and creating our work will always have a value and an "easter egg" for us — should we choose to see the opportunities to enter into the role and the relationship.”

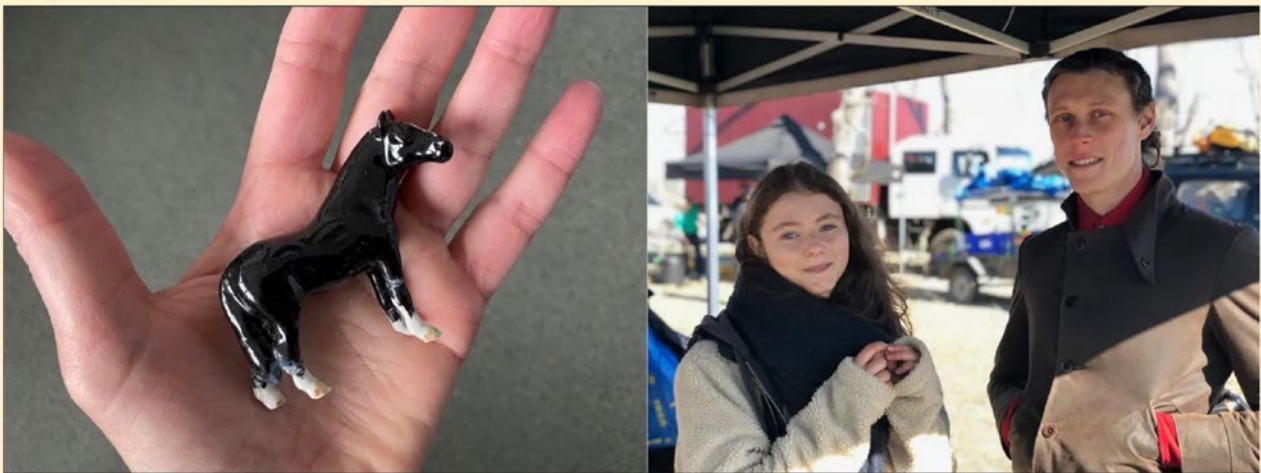


Actors Emily Swain and Rory Alexander

TIME + THOUGHT = DEPTH

When you take the time to select a gift from your character to the other actor's character, you are gifting to yourself the opportunity to think yourself more deeply into your role. You are making time to consider the history of the characters, as Emily was, when she time-jumped back into gifting Rory a book that Rachel would have given Connell many years before.

You are taking time to consider the theme of the piece and the nature of the relationship, as Thomasin McKenzie was when she chose this little china horse to gift to George McKay in their preparation for the film THE TRUE HISTORY OF THE KELLY GANG (2019) by Justin Kurzel — because in the story, his character Ned gives her character Mary a foal.



RAINE BOYS

I used this idea again recently when our youngest daughter Davida McKenzie was cast in another Australian film about horse-thieving, alongside young actor, Jo Cumpston. Davida bought this kids' painting set and posted him the plastic horse she had painted. He sent back this photo when he received it. They were using the postal system and Social Media as tools to create connection. It was very successful as you can see in the last photo, screenshotted from James Campbell's beautiful cinematography.



SANTA GIRL

When you take the time to select a gift from your character to the other actor's character, you are taking time to consider the relationships that glue the characters together, as the actors playing the family did in this Macy's Christmas ad SANTA GIRL starring Brooklynn Prince, directed by Garth Davis.

We themed our rehearsal day around gift-giving at Christmas and took the cast shopping at a nearby \$2 Shop to buy inexpensive gifts and cards for each other. (I arranged petty cash with Production beforehand as well as setting up a collection of scissors, tape, ribbon, pens and colouring pens at our base).

Back at the rehearsal room the cast industriously wrapped and decorated and wrote cards for each other's characters in preparation for our gift-exchanging ritual. In this process they bonded with each other through shared activities, creating trusting, relaxed relationships.

In his Christmas card to his “daughter”, the actor playing Virginia’s step-dad wrote:

“My beautiful Virginia, Merry Christmas! You are the most fantastic daughter in the whole world! I love you very much and I am so proud (and so lucky) to be your dad. You can do anything you want to. Never let anyone make you feel like you can't. To my favourite little Santa, love Dad”

And then each actor read out the cards they had received — which made a very meaningful moment for both writer and receiver. Here you can see some of these relationships being built.



RITUAL

A ritual is a ceremony consisting of a series of actions performed according to a prescribed order.

Gift-giving and receiving is a ritual. This gives us a structure that actors can relax inside. You give the other actor a gift, they open it and thank you and a conversation ensues about what it is, where you found it. A game is played, a toy is played with, a card is read out.

In the rehearsal room I will often go on to use gifts as a provocation for an improvisation...

"In the kitchen, make tea together for the other characters. Use the gifts you have been given in some way to feed the scene".