

## INTRODUCTION

Back in August 2015, I went to see comedian Colin Quinn perform *The New York Story*, his salty valentine to his hometown. Nearly 200 of us were packed into the intimate Cherry Lane Theater, excited at being so close to a comic at the top of his game. Quinn rambled around the stage, a cluttered set meant to evoke the row houses of his bygone Brooklyn neighborhood. With his trademark restless energy, he spun yarn after yarn about the many ethnic groups that have shaped the city. Quinn was an equal opportunity offender; no group escaped his hilarious barbs, which were loaded with vivid details and relied on precise sequencing and timing.

Like most people, I marvel at how stage actors master a role. As if by magic, they transform into a character and sweep us up into their world. Skilled actors can so wholly inhabit an emotional state, nail an accent, or adopt the mannerisms of another era that we forget we are watching fiction. And that is the point. George Bernard Shaw wrote, “The function of the actor is to make the audience imagine for the moment that real things are happening to real people.”

What tends to impress us most, though, is the sheer volume of text actors commit to memory: Shakespearean soliloquies; Edward Albee’s raging dialogue; the long, beautiful musings of Tom Stoppard’s prose; verse after verse of Sondheim’s lyrics. How do they do it?

Off stage, I use and teach a number of techniques to help non-actors better remember names and faces, scripts and speeches, and facts and figures. But off-stage memory work doesn’t require the same sort of physical and emotional intensity as, say, the lead in *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*.

How do they prepare? I wanted to know how they tackled especially challenging roles with dense dialogue and non-sequiturs, how they got back on track when their minds went blank, and how their training and

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experience shaped their memorization process overall. And I vowed to start a series of interviews that night. With Colin Quinn. Whom I'd never met.

After the show, I dawdled in the lobby and bought Quinn's book, an anthology of stories that his show was based on. I wandered out onto the sidewalk toward the stage door. Well-wishing friends and family members of the star were being ushered in for private audiences. I felt like a fish out of water. I eased my anxiety by telling myself I would focus on congratulating Quinn for a very entertaining show, and just ask him to autograph my copy of his book.

The bouncer poked his head inside the stage door and told Quinn that there was one more person waiting to see him. Quinn opened the door and stepped out. He fixed my face with a quizzical "should-I-know-you?" expression. I stood up straighter, mustered my best disarming smile, firmly shook his hand, and stuttered out my interest in memorization.

To my relief, the conversation progressed more easily than I expected. I said I was asking prominent people in different professions—actors mostly—about how they memorized their material. I had already published a book on how to remember names and faces and pulled a copy out of my backpack and gave it to Quinn. We autographed each other's books, and he scrawled his email address in my copy. "Let me give this some thought," he said. "Email me, and I'll get back to you."

The next day, I wrote him an email and two weeks later, Colin wrote me back:

"Memorization to a comedian is important. Every comic has their own technique, I guess. Mine is to tape sets and listen to them before I go on. It's tedious, but it works pretty well. Every comic has tales of woe where they said something in a certain order, and they can't remember the little word that was not the punch line, but it made the joke work. It could even be a preposition. And you go, 'why doesn't that work anymore?' And it's lost forever. But most comics never really have a logical technique or order that's consistent, partly because we are ADD in my opinion, and partly because we became comedians because we don't like logic or rules or techniques."

In just 125 words, Quinn's answers delivered mind-opening insights, a spirit of collaboration, and the shape of questions to come.

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That exchange became the first installment of a blog that I'd build out every few weeks. Whenever I would go to a show, I carried a reporter's notepad with me for impromptu stage door interviews, as well as a copy of my memory book to give away as a token of appreciation.

Actors usually gave me their time, along with an email address or phone number for more detailed follow-up. Their generosity exceeded my expectations. They weren't used to discussing this topic at all, let alone with an anonymous audience member at the stage door. They let loose with wild, engaging, and very personal stories.

Three years later, I had amassed an extensive collection of interviews with actors, singers, musicians, improvisers, and professionals in related fields, all talking about their experiences with memory and memorization. The interviews with the performing artists comprise this book.

If you act, the interviews offer you a chance to learn new approaches or reinforce what you already know. If you sing, recite poetry, or tell stories on stage, the applications are also clear. If you are a playwright, songwriter, or script doctor, the knowledge contained in this book can make your words flow more smoothly, your logic cohere, and your themes resonate more deeply with both the actors and the audience.

But what about the rest of us? Why should we care? Understanding how performers internalize their roles can reshape our own learning process. Acting methods show us the way to get any material into our body—to know it by heart, down to our fingertips, like the back of our hand.

On and off stage, most of us are pursuing the same goals of mental clarity, physical expressiveness, and more intimate engagement with others. No matter what we aspire to become—a character in a play or a more enlightened person in real life—the lesson is this: the most effective tactics involve physical, psychological, emotional, and even spiritual immersion (Bree Elrod).

The same techniques that guide actors in embodying a character can help the non-actor master a foreign language (Joseph Medeiros), reconstruct the order of historical events (Denise Summerford), or memorize the periodic table (Mick Lynch). We can sharpen our hearing and our awareness of our surroundings (Chris Sams) to create more vivid associations. Our appreciation for the power of language grows (Rocco dal

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Vera), as does our empathy. By being more present and engaged, we remember more.

Some performers will say that real life makes them nervous, that they can relax only on stage. This will seem contradictory to non-actors since most of us are terrified of public speaking. You will come to understand the value of breathing and what to do with your hands (Michael Rhodes), and how staying calm—and curious—strengthens your recall (Greg Skura).

For anyone who's struggled with dyslexia, it will come as a welcome surprise that a number of talented actors have figured out how to compensate for their learning differences to commit material to memory (Phillip Boykin).

When actors forget their lines, what do they do? The actors here explain how they get back on track, often without the audience even realizing anything went awry (Kendal Hartse).

What are the pros and cons of technology as it relates to memory? There are new apps that can facilitate line learning in context (David Josefsberg) and technology that interferes with our ability to remain present (Patricia Ryan Madson).

Lastly, let's not forget the value of old-fashioned hard work. Repetition and frequency contribute to muscle memory (Kelley Curran) and etch deep grooves into our consciousness.

The instructions for using this book are simple. Start anywhere. Jump around. Embrace the contradictions. Discover what approaches work best for you in different situations. As the actors here remind us, stay open to new interpretations, attack your fear of getting things wrong, and remember that when you get bad choices out of the way, you clear the path for better ones.