

## As You Like It

*All the world's a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players:  
They have their exits and their entrances;  
And one man in his time plays many parts.*  
William Shakespeare

Before catfishing became a hobby for bored teenagers, lonely adults and twisted souls, before savvy computer geeks developed online multiplayer interactive role-playing games, before Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson developed the old-school fantasy game, Dungeons and Dragons, Shakespeare's Jaques delivered the immortal monologue, "All the world's a stage...." (*As You Like It*) in 1599 or 1600. Shakespeare's character was making the argument that we all have roles to play and that these roles are scripted for us based on our current stage of life – be it infancy, youth, middle age or old age.

A few centuries later, Erving Goffman took this notion and used it as metaphor for the way that we interact and go about our daily lives. Like Shakespeare, Goffman noted that we are all playing roles, but expanded the idea to acknowledge the importance of context. Not only do our parts change depending on our life stage, they are shaped by the role we are cast in (parent, child, employee, customer), when and where the action takes place and who, if anyone, is watching. Like actors on the stage, we use settings, clothing, and verbal and non-verbal cues to influence how others perceive us. To Goffman, we use everything -- the way we wear our hair, the car we drive, the clothes we wear, the places we frequent, the expressions we use, our body posturing -- to shape others' perceptions. These efforts are most obvious on first dates, job interviews and other situations where first impressions matter. For example, think about the attention you tend to give to what you are wearing and how you look when you are going out with someone for the first time or going for a job interview.

Though it's more obvious in the public sphere with strangers and people we don't know very well, impression management also plays a role when we interact with our lovers, family, and close friends. For example, think back to high school when you needed to convince your parents that you were responsible so that you could borrow the car or that you were sober when you came in after a night of carousing. Or think about the way you posture your body, adjust your tone of voice and the words you use when you are angry and want your partner to stop or start doing something versus when you feel hurt and want them to apologize and possibly feel bad about what they have done or not done.

Most of the fights that couples, families and friends have revolve around breaches in role. We protest when our co-actors try to change the script, violate our expectations of how they *should* play out their role, or miss, ignore or simply don't buy the impression we are trying to pull off. We freak out when our hyper-responsible father has a mid-life crisis, buys a sports car and trades in his Dockers

for Diesel jeans or our activist partner sheds her purple hair and multiple piercings to move up the corporate ladder. We get angry when our lover forgets our anniversary, leaves dirty socks on the kitchen table, gets drunk, and/or cheats. And we feel devastated when we feel misunderstood.

The catch is that this drama isn't playing on a blank slate. We interpret our co-actors' performance through our own distorted lenses. For example, if you had an ex or two who cheated on you, you are likely to be suspicious of your current partner if they take a phone call in the other room, spend a great deal of time texting, or come home later than expected. Likewise, they interpret your performance through their own distorted lenses.

Even though we are constantly playing roles, most of our performances are unconscious at least only partially acknowledged. However, when we become aware of the fact that our drama really is just that, drama, we can make changes.

You can do this by taking a step back and imagine watching yourself and your co-actor(s) as if you are all on a stage. Imagine directing yourself to respond in a way that is the most likely to get you what you really want. You might have to take a few breaths, ground yourself, and let yourself admit that while part of you wants Vengeance with a capital V, what you really want is connection, peace, or simply easiness. It might be helpful to "play it forward" and imagine the outcome of throwing gasoline on the relational fire – which is, I suppose great if you are going for a bonfire effect, but in the end, everyone gets burned in a firefight. And then you have to face the shame of being an asshole and possibly the pain of destroying a relationship.

From the director's chair, you can make a choice about whether you want to be rude to the waitperson that takes forever to take your order or if charm and a negligent tip and or a later phone call to the manager will suffice . You might be surprised to see that charm usually works much better than belligerence. You also might notice that when you put yourself in the director's chair, the everyday comments that push your buttons no longer seem as important. Because, after all, "all the world's a stage..."

*To ask Regina a question, propose a column topic, read about her approach to counseling, or check out her books and other writing, go to: [www.ReginaSewell.com](http://www.ReginaSewell.com)*

Catfishing -- The phenomenon of Internet predators that fabricate online identities and entire social circles to trick people into emotional/romantic relationships.  
(UrbanDictionary)

Erving Goffman laid this perspective out in, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*.

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