

CHATS & CONVERSATIONS
Dave (David) Maldonado, Actor
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Steve Taft: You have over 60 television and film credits and a number of theatre credits. That's impressive. You also live in the Houston area, are married and have a family. So, first let me say congratulations! You seem to have discovered that rare balance between a professional acting career and family.

Dave Maldonado: Thank you.

ST: Taking that big step to pursue a professional career as an actor is big one. Many students say that's what they want to do but very few actually embrace that personal risk and go for it. When did you know acting was in your future and when did you decide to take that big step?

DM: Well, a few years into my experience at UL. I was always interested in acting, but I didn't think it would be a job. But the more acting classes I took I kind of got the bug and it seemed like it was something I was pretty good at. So I said, "Where can I do theatre?" And one of the places was Houston because they have a medium sized market with the Alley Theatre and a few smaller professional theatres, but I still wasn't ready to make that jump until my wife got a job here (in Houston). I remember talking to you about that. "How do you pursue a career and have your wife support you?" I just remember talking to you about that and you said, "You really just have to embrace that." And I did. I embraced it, although I got a part-time job as soon as we got here.

ST: Well, she's the one that has to embrace that concept . . .

DM: Yeah, and she was so on board. She got a great job here. It was also closer to Austin which at the time was the place to do film. Little did I know that Louisiana was about to explode in terms of TV and film opportunities. Anyway, it was right before we moved that I knew I wanted to do this for real and try to get an agent and start slowly but surely begin to build a full-on acting career.

ST: When you did make the move to Houston was it initially your intention to pursue acting in theatre or was television and film always on your radar?

DM: Theatre was in the forefront for me. There's something called the Co-ops in Houston every year [now known as the Alliance Auditions] and you audition one time for all the theatres, all of the professional theatres. I started doing community theatre as soon as I got here and I was trying to get my foot in the door of all these smaller professional theatres and I was starting to make some contacts and things. I'd audition for the Alley once-a-year and that was my goal, to do theatre, work at the Alley one day and to work at these smaller theatres. I did that for a couple of years and it was really an uphill battle because all my friends and peers that I was getting to know had already been here for ten to fifteen years and they already had all these contacts and it was really difficult for me to overcome all that and even get considered. But then I started doing commercials and a couple of auditions for film and TV and I thought, maybe this is a better avenue for me. There was a smaller theatre that opened up just down the road (the Texas Repertory Theatre) and instead of going downtown I got in on the ground

floor and started doing theatre there and started doing theatre consistently. It paid a little money and it was just down the road.

ST: Although you already had a lot of experience, what was it like to work alongside Kurt Russell and Mark Wahlberg in *Deepwater Horizon*?

DM: Well, that's the biggest thing for me thus far. I tell people I have a lot of small roles in big movies and a lot of big roles in small movies. But that's my first ever pretty good size role in a big movie. And don't forget, Peter Berg was the director and he's kind of the biggest driving force in my experience with that. I've had some director's that are very gentle and speak to you very softly . . . a lot of British directors are like that. [*In a British accent*], "That's was great, brilliant, just do this." And he's the exact opposite. He's in your face. He's challenging you every step. He's yelling. He's kind of like a football coach. "This is the 4th quarter. What are you gonna give me?" It's kind of a sink or swim atmosphere. With him, like when I was on *Friday Night Lights*, there's a ton of hand-held camera moving all of over the place . . . they make it up kind of as they go. They use a script, but there's a lot of people kind of giving advice (people in the industry) and telling us, "Well, it would be this way." We would just write a scene on the spot and write it down and shoot the scene right after that. So, there was a ton of improv. He'd say, "What would you do when you get off the rig? I'm giving you a monologue. Go, go! What are you gonna do?" And I'm like, well, I got to think of something. So, that's what I did. With him it was just sort of a surreal, very challenging environment. With Kurt Russell, he was kind of like an uncle, a really down to earth father figure for me, just very approachable. Mark Wahlberg was kind of just like the coolest guy in the room as you can imagine. He doesn't really give you the time of day until he knows you're worthy of it.

ST: Well, from my perspective I think it's pretty cool that two former UL students (you and Dana Gourrier) have worked with Kurt Russell and Mark Wahlberg.

DM: Dana, she's kind of been the one I've been chasing. I want to work like her. Fortunately, I've been getting some momentum, but Dana, she's doing great work.

ST: You've touched on it a little bit, but in regards to rehearsals on these larger films, whether it's *Deepwater Horizon* or *Trumbo*, is there much rehearsal or is it walk in, get the blocking and shoot the scene?

DM: Coming from a more theatre background I try to learn the whole script before going in. People in film, especially if you're more of a name actor . . . you have your schedule ahead of time. With Kurt on *Deepwater* the schedule was so all over the place. There was so much inconsistency with the schedule because of the weather and all this other stuff, with improv and everything. We'd show up to do a scene and Pete would say, "We're going to shoot this scene instead of this one." I was like, "Alright, cool. Let's do it." I was like a little puppy willing to please, whatever they wanted me to do. But Kurt was like, "But that's not what I prepared!" He's use to working a certain way. But as far as rehearsals go it's usually a fast-paced environment. You get the blocking rehearsal, get the lines in there and know where you're going to stand. Then you do a rehearsal for camera so they know where you're going to stand and then you shoot it and then there's a little feedback on your performance and then you shoot it again or a couple of more times and then you're done. I try to get all my work done ahead of time because there's not a whole lot of leeway.

ST: As an actor, I applaud you. John Goodman, a Missouri State grad is known for being asked, "What's your secret to success?" His reply has been something along the lines of: "I show up on time. I know my lines and hit my mark."

Now, you seem to make the most of your moments. I particularly like that opening scene in *Trumbo* and also your scene in *Free State of Jones*. How challenging is it to step into the shoes of such characters and make the most of such moments?

DM: Well, the two times I've worked with Matthew McConaughey are very, very polar opposite environments. The *Free State of Jones* is a very interesting story for me. (Forgive me if I go a little long here.) I read for *Free State of Jones* several times. I read for the casting director and then went back and read for the director and went back to New Orleans several times from Houston to read for this movie. I just wanted to work on the film so bad. Once auditions were over I said, "Just give me a character with a name, a day or two. Just don't give me Sgt. Number Two." So, I waited and I finally got a text from my agent who said, "They want you to play the Polling Station Clerk." And I was very disappointed. After four trips to New Orleans that's what I'm gonna do? So, I went and stayed in this hotel and looked at the call sheet and I was way down on the call sheet and I see all these guys playing parts I read for. And I know half of them. I was in a bad place. Why am I even doing this? All of that changed when I showed up on set the next day. As soon as I walked onto the set and went into wardrobe and into my trailer and everything, right from the beginning everyone made me feel like I was important. And when I showed up on the set it was the same thing. The director said, "OK, we're going to shoot this a certain way." And the scene itself was kind of template of what we were gonna do. There was a lot more going on there. I try to figure out every different way I could, but there was a lot more going on in that scene than I had originally thought. We shot that scene all day long. We shot it from our side and then turned the camera around and shot it from their side and it took forever. And we did every kind of way you could imagine and the director was very demanding, "Ok, let's do it this way now." There's a lot of subtext in the scene, a kind of stand-off between he and I and his guys and my guys . . . a lot important things going on. Am I scared? Am I brave? A coward? It could have been played a lot of different ways. I have a friend in the movie, Chris Berry one of the leads, he's one of McConaughey's kind of henchmen or right-hand man, and I'm doing my thing and I think I'm doing OK. We shot for a couple of hours and during a break he leaned over the table and goes, "Hey." I say, "What's up?" He says, "You're kicking ass." And I say, "Thanks man. Thank you." In another break McConaughey comes up to me in a very low voice, "You're doing great. We're doing awesome." And then I was like, "OK, maybe this is an important job for me." That was kind of a lesson for me. No small roles, that kind of thing. Although I wanted one of those name roles for a few weeks, they saw me as an actor that could play that character for a particular day and do it very well. And it was a very important scene and they had faith in me. I need to remember that in the future and just embrace that.

ST: For the theatre actor that gets an opportunity to work in TV or film for the first time, what's your advice for them in regards to their first day (and maybe only day) on the set?

DM: You know, they got the job already and you always hear when going from theatre to film, "Make it smaller. Make it smaller." But since they already got the job, I would say just relax. Even recently I was working on a TV show and there was so much going on in a scene we were about to shoot . . . there was a lot of violence and a lot of blocking that was very physical and there was gun play and all these different moments and I was trying to work it all in my head beforehand and it's impossible to do that. You can kind of hit some of the marks and start thinking about it, but until you get on set and they're blocking through it, there's just no way to work all that stuff out. All that stuff is going to be worked out

ahead of time on set. I would just say know your lines, know your intentions and all that stuff and then just relax, listen and soak it in because they're going to tell you everything they want you to do. And if they don't like it, they'll tell you to do something different. So, don't try to master the moment when you get there, they'll let you know what you need to do.

ST: You just noted a very important part of the process. The importance of listening, of being open, or making an adjustment and trying something new when requested. What has been your experience regarding the differences of auditioning for theatre opposed to television and film?

DM: Well, with stage the performance (as you know) is bigger. You have to reach the back row. In film, you don't have any freedom (of movement). You walk up and hit your mark and the camera is right there. That was the most difficult thing for me. I know some very talented theatre actors that want to do film but have trouble maneuvering that. It's really that simple. You stay very still. The camera is right there and is going to catch everything. There's the old Jack Lemmon story. He's working on a film and the director keeps telling him "Do less." They do another take. "Do Less." And they do another take and over and over. Finally Jack says, "If I do any less I won't be doing anything." And the director says, "Exactly."

ST: And many theatre actors aren't aware of the different camera lenses which can make a subtle difference in their performance. Also, the ability for an actor to be able to control what their body is doing is so important in order to stay within the shot, particularly on close-ups.

In the independent film *Jack's Apocalypse* you were the lead. Did your experience differ knowing you were, in a way, carrying the film?

DM: For that one I definitely felt like it was all riding on me. It was a pretty grueling schedule. Every night I would go over everything we were going to shoot the next day and make sure I was focused. On that particular film there's a lot demanded from the lead. It's a very emotional role. He's a drug addict, he hits rock bottom and he's considering suicide. There's all these things. I made sure I stayed healthy and didn't get sick and relied on some of things I learned from you guys way back in the day at UL and SETC (workshops) in order to hit some of those emotional spots. Once that was ingrained in me I kind of hit a switch now. Basically I had to kind of carry it, but we had a great cast and we had a good support system.

ST: What is your personal approach or process to creating a character?

DM: That's a good question because I just got done working on a film here. It's a very dark, emotional film with an ensemble cast and all of these people have their approaches. My approach is very simple. I don't take it too seriously. I mean the subject matter is serious and we all want to do a good job, but I learn my lines, have a basic concept of what my character is feeling and I put some of myself into that. Obviously if the character is a serial killer I have to figure out the state of mind someone like that has and may be thinking or doing, but I work on instinct more than anything. I don't try to take it so seriously that I'm over-analyzing. Different cast members would ask me different questions and the answers didn't matter so much to me. I just felt like, "Let's go shoot it. Everything should be as it is in real life, it will come together if we're authentic in our performance"

ST: It appears that most of your roles are dramatic in nature. Do you long to do a comedy?

DM: I would love to do comedy. There's a ton of it in Lafayette [Louisiana] at the community theatres and we did some at UL, but for some reason there's not a lot of comedy being shot in the south. Most of the sitcoms are in New York or L.A. I guess. I would love to be a part of a sitcom or have the opportunity to audition for a sitcom because I think it's a lot like community theatre or like all the dinner theatre I was doing with Acting Unlimited with the comedy and the range. With that being said, if I had the opportunity and got pigeon-holed in that, that wouldn't be good. There's a couple of comedies for *Adult Swim* that I've been reading for that are kind of strange and surreal and kind of gory and irreverent . . . live-action stuff. I'm having a good time reading for it but haven't quite broken the code yet. But, if I read for ten films, maybe one is comedy. It's all action drama, that kind of stuff.

ST: One of the questions many young actors have is: "How do I get an agent?" What has been your experience in that regard and what's your recommendation for newly graduated students in regards to getting an agent?

DM: I remember I was doing theatre in Lafayette [years ago] and someone told me in passing, "You should get an agent." And I said, "Well, I just can't just go get an agent." And they said, "Yeah you do. Just go get one." Especially in Lafayette (*laughter*), "I'll try and do that then." So, I set up a meeting and got an agent in Lafayette and started doing commercials here and there. But, on a larger scale like in Atlanta or Austin or some of the more medium sized markets for film and TV, I would do your research ahead of time, set up meeting and go and talk with these agents and try and get a feel for them . . . if you have a good connection and if it will be a good relationship. I have a great relationship with my agent, Landrum Arts in Louisiana, as well as Pastorini-Bosby here in Houston. I would say don't wait. Some people wait until "I have a couple of more credits or after I get my plastic surgery." Don't wait. Do it now. If they see something in you and they see a hole in their roster they can fill with you, do it. They may tell you to take some acting classes before they send you out or something, but I would say be as particular with them as they are with you. Set up several meetings with different agents. Set up the meetings now, but wait to sign with any particular agency. When you have a good feeling for an agent, sign with them and let it go from there.

ST: So, when the young actor meets with that agent does the agent want to see a monologue or two or just chat and have a conversation and get to know that actor?

DM: Well, when I first got an agent in Houston twenty years ago they had no idea who I was and I hadn't done anything yet. So, they asked for a monologue and I had one prepared that I'd been doing for all of the Co-op auditions in Houston, so I did that. Nowadays it's less common (although you and I both know you should always have one or two), but I haven't done a monologue in fifteen or twenty years, but I have one ready. They want to get to know you and make sure you're not a jerk.

ST: And I imagine the best course of action in such a conversation is to just listen and be yourself.

DM: That's right, because you're interviewing them as well. People are so eager to get an agent. If you hear someone say, "Well, you're going to have to pay us . . ." that's something to listen for because you want an agent that's reputable and you don't pay an agent until you get the job.

ST: What qualities do you look for in a director?

DM: It's interesting. I did a couple of TV shows recently and I worked with a couple of soft-spoken British directors and I loved it. I'm under a lot of pressure, the sides were just given to me that morning and I had to learn them and I had all this makeup stuff and they were being gentle with me and saying, "That's

great. We're going to do it again." And they gave me a lot of freedom with what I was doing and I just really, really loved that. On the other hand, there's Peter Berg and *Deepwater Horizon* he's in your face the whole time saying, "Come on, let's go. Show me what you got." That was exhilarating and I loved that. And at the end of the day to have him come up and say, "You did a good job. You rose to the occasion and I appreciate it." So, I like them both to be honest with you. As an actor I try to adapt to the environment and I take pride in that.

ST: I imagine Peter Berg probably works like that all the time and that's his style of working in regards to improvisation and being pretty intense. However, I imagine, given the nature of the film and the frenetic action of the film (particularly after the rig blows up and all hell breaks loose), that his directorial style added to the environment and helped the cast in terms of being in the moment.

DM: Right. I mean more than half the movie was under disastrous circumstances and there was a lot of improv and he was yelling through a megaphone, "This is happening and then this is happening." At one point we were doing a scene and he was throwing ear plugs at us so we had something to react to.

ST: What suggestions do you have for an actor that is type-cast and wants to break the perception people typically have of that actor?

DM: It's taken me a long time to get to this state of mind but it's really a marathon. You really have to embrace the fact that if you want to be successful and you want to have moments of success, it's going to take a long time. You have to go in and audition for these different projects and enjoy the moment and go in with confidence and give them your instincts and how you think the role should be and then just forget about it. I mean when you get rejected, it's not like they say, "You're bad. Leave." or they call you and say, "You didn't get the part." You don't hear anything. Ninety-five percent of the time nobody tells you anything. You just have to have confidence and faith in your performance and go in there and do your thing. A lot of times they may want someone shorter, or a woman or a different ethnicity or you don't look like the dad in the family.

ST: Have you ever auditioned and not gotten the part, but later on the casting director or director remembers you from a previous audition which may lead to being cast at another audition?

DM: Every now and then that happens. I've had directors talk to me at a party and say, "Oh yeah, you read for . . ." or a casting director will see me a couple of years later and say, "I remember when you read for this." And then they'll say, "You were so good." That's great to hear several years later, although I would have liked to hear that the next day when I was waiting to hear about the role, but that's the one thing you can't get hung up on.

ST: Networking is often a big part of the business. How have you navigated the need to get to know people within the business?

DM: Well, I don't really like the word networking. I don't think anyone should contact someone or go to any event for the sole purpose of networking. If you're getting auditions you're meeting casting directors. If you go in and you're being yourself and they like you, you're networking as far as that goes. You're going to be building relationships when you go in to audition and being yourself in the room. You don't need to worry about networking. Just go in there and do your job. Now, if you're going to a fund-raising event or something like that just be yourself and get to know people. That's all you need to do. That in itself is networking, but if you're going to an event and think, "I'm going to meet this guy and I'm

going to give him my card.” that’s just . . . if you meet people and your authentic I think that’s a lot more important than giving someone your business card.

ST: If you had to give one suggestion for those of us that work in education regarding the training of actors and preparing them for the real world, what would that be?

DM: As far as film and television I think on-camera technique is important. Theatre programs don’t really teach that. A couple of classes on technique, hitting your mark, and also a film and television auditioning class or workshop is essential, working on cold-readings and performance for the camera . . . that sort of thing. Getting students use to adjusting to that kind of environment and how to handle themselves in the room. When you walk into the room they don’t want to hear the actor talk about how much you love their films. Just be yourself and relax. They just want to get to know *you*. Those are the two I would add to the curriculum.

ST: I appreciate you saying that. One of my biggest frustrations over the years is that we live in the 21st century, yet so many theatre programs are not training students to work in this 21st century. We continue to train students as we always have and to work in a rather limited field in terms of opportunity. I respect the theatre and applaud anyone that can make a living doing it professionally, but wouldn’t it be nice if academic programs made students aware of the many more occupational opportunities available if we embrace technology and training students to work not only in the theatre but in television, film, industrials, the internet and other like environments? Sorry, I digress.

ST: Is there anything you’d like to add to our conversation today either about the business or you?

DM: There’s something you just hit on. There’s lot of different jobs in the industry obviously. I’m extremely fortunate to have a wife that has a really good job. She pays the mortgage and I’m able to do my thing and travel. I handle most of the duties as far as kids go, doctor’s appointments and all that good stuff . . . but the most important thing I think for an actor wanting to work in television or film is they need to consider the fact that you can audition anywhere. That’s the only reason I’m able to work. Ninety percent of the work I do (the audition) is recorded on video and sent out. I’m working remotely and sending auditions to New Mexico, Atlanta, Dallas and Louisiana. There are a lot of talented people in Houston and we’re working towards building the film and TV industry here, but most of the time we have to travel. Now that I’m union (SAG), there are a lot of industrials and commercials that are shot here, but most are non-union so I can’t really participate in that. Get a good taped audition, get your lights, camera and all that stuff . . . if you’re computer savvy you’re half-way there. I’m not. I have to depend on other people for that. That’s the reason I can work from where I am because it’s all remote. Now, there are times when I have to make a decision. Do I go to that call-back in Atlanta and pay \$400 or \$500 dollars for a plane ticket? I mean there are times I’ve broken even on a project just because I wanted to make a connection with that casting director. So, there’s a few decisions an actor has to make but I think that’s how you build a career. I’m working off of a template of someone I know. He’s kind of mentor of mine. That’s what he did in the beginning. “Oh, I have another call-back. Put it on the credit card.” He made all these trips and made all this foundational groundwork and it’s taken him twenty years to do that (and he was a prominent theatre actor here in Houston). He’s working and has had several recurring roles on television and leading roles. He’s what I’m on working towards and I’m trying to build my career after him. If I have to go to Atlanta or anywhere else, I’ll make those connections and eventually it’s going to pay off.

ST: I want to thank you for your time and appreciate you sharing your thoughts and experiences and most of all catching up. Have a great day.
