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Michael Ornstein

Actor, Writer and Visual Artist

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Welcome to Media Masters, a series of one-to-one interviews with people at the top of the media game. Today I'm joined down the line by Michael Ornstein, actor, writer and visual artist, best known for his role as Chucky Marstein in the hit shows Sons of Anarchy and Mayans M.C. Michael played Chucky for seven seasons of the outlaw motorcycle club drama and a further two series of its spinoff. His screen credits include Homicide, Life on the Street, Law and Order and Seinfeld. On stage he created the role of Lewis in the 1991 world premier of Angels in America at the Eureka theatre in San Francisco. He is also a recognized and highly accomplished painter. Michael, thank you for joining me.

Thanks for having me.

I'm incredibly excited to talk to you because as you know, we've known each other for a while. We're friends, and I was such a big fan of Sons of Anarchy. Do you think that people are sort of pleasantly surprised when they come to know you that you played Chucky so well but you have all of these other incredible aspects. As an artist, it's a pleasant surprise as people get to know you, is it not?

Well, they're always shocked at, like who I am and that I'm not, you know, Chucky and that I have fingers. The first time I realised that I was in a pub in New York, I was eating a hamburger, and I looked over to my left and this guy was staring at my hands and my hamburger and I was like, why is he staring at my hamburger? And then I realised, he's looking at my fingers! So I smiled, you know, and I said "hey, how are you doing?" And he said, "so you have fingers?" and that blew my mind. I thought, wow, man, people really believe this. There's an element of Chucky that they really believe so that when they see me on the street, they actually think that I'm Chucky and it's a trip when they meet me because I'm completely not. I'm the antithesis of Chucky basically. So, it's a trip to be well known for a character that I'm completely not like, and I love that 'cause I'm a character actor. So I guess I did my job, you know?

It's a compliment, isn't it to how good and actor you are that people believe it. But there is, there was always a warmth to Chucky. I mean, obviously he was a serial masturbator and all of the various things and was stealing from the Chinese and presumably you're not doing all of that. I was going to ask you about the acting processes, there must be something of you that you do bring to that? Or is that not the way it works? Do you sort of get in Chucky's mindset and then you're Chucky when the director calls action? How does it work?

I mean, I'm under the impression, I've always been under the impression that to be an actor, what you have to do is you have to explore yourself and every single one of us has so many different levels and so many different aspects of ourselves. I think as an actor, what I was taught to do at a young age and have always done is, well, you get a character and you read the script and you figure out what you want to do and how you want to build that character, and then what you do is you just go fishing inside of yourself. I mean, I just go look inside myself for qualities that will benefit that character because, you know, I'm under the impression that we all have every aspect of everybody inside of us and you just gotta go hunting for it. Then what you do is you just turn up the volume on those aspects of yourself. So, you know, Chucky, I felt like, had a lot of…he's a deep guy, he's got a beautiful big heart and he's sensitive, and he has a lot of ticks. He has a lot of stuff wrong with him and you know, he's trying very hard to find a family, to find a home, you know? So all those aspects of somebody, you know, I just brought up out of myself, and it worked for, you know, forming that character. I think that's how it goes, you know? I mean, if I didn't put, you know, I look at building a character just the way I would look at building a bolognese sauce, you know, you have ingredients and, you know, if you put too many ingredients, you know, it's a mush and then, you know, you gotta be careful on what ingredients you're putting in because you're building a, you know, a human. So you're building a human being, you're building someone who you want people to believe, right? So, you know, I just kept him really human and kept him really compassionate and made him into, you know, a full person, you know, as opposed to just focusing on the masturbating. And if I would've done that, it never would've worked, you know?

Yeah, because there was the element of comic relief in some aspects of your character, but you brought such a warmth and a compassion and a vulnerability to the character that I think, you know, audiences warmed to you. Like, I felt guilty for sort of wanting Clay to succeed because, credit to Ron Pearlman as an actor, he's just an out and out bad bastard. He's just evil. He's a psychopath. I was annoyed that I wanted him to succeed, but with someone like yourself as the character, you actually do want them to succeed because of that vulnerability. I was going to ask you, you know, how involved are you in the progression of a character because, you know, Fox must have done or FX must have done some kind of, you know, audience survey where they discovered that you were quite a popular character, therefore give you more lines. How does that work? Did they say right, we're gonna give you a backstory, or we're gonna give you this, or do you create a backstory in your mind first that then the writers either might confirm or change as the character progresses?

It's like, I always build a character in my mind. No matter what and a backstory, no matter what, no matter if I have, you know, one scene in an episode of a show, you know, I'm gonna build an entire world around that person and, you know, so I built my own world around Chucky for that first episode that I did in season one. I just wanted, I had to convince myself that this character was from another planet that Kurt developed, you know, I had to bring myself to it to make it very truthful, to make it believable. I built an entire world around this guy, but I kept it completely secret. I mean, you know, nobody knew what I was thinking or who I was, or any of that stuff. And, uh, what was cool about it was that I didn't know any of the actors, they didn't know me, there wasn't really much backstory to the character. So when I like, that scene where I meet Charlie and Ron in the van, that was really the first time I met them and talked to them. I mean, I met them at the read through, but I purposely like, kind of stayed away because I wanted, I knew that was one of the first shots we were gonna do and I wanted to meet them that way. So, when I shook their hands, that was kind of the first time we met, and then I put my hand down my pants. The thing about the masturbating is that it's, even Chucky says it, it's not sexual, it's a tick, it's a nervous tick. It's like, you know, people have ticks, you know, like tourettes or this or that, which I got to explore through the show, you know, through all of those

seasons. But, I never really spoke to Kurt or any of the writers about ideas or this or that, that we sorta like had this building of this character throughout this, all these seasons at a trust, you know, because I looked so forward to getting every script, because every script, the character was different. On some level it was a different tick, or I was trying Ryan to do this, or I was, you know, uh, building a relationship with a character like, you know, with Katie, with Gemma or, you know, stuff like that. So I didn't really have to talk about anything or give ideas or this or that, because I was just so blown away by the brilliance of every single script and what I had to do in that script. And, uh, so, you know, it was just really, uh, kind of a visceral experience, you know, with a lot of trust based in it, trust for, you know, the other actors and the writers and Kurt and the directors, and just trust for the whole world of, what we were laying down, you know?

I've got such huge respect for actors and I'd have a few clients in Hollywood, front of screen. And I can remember the moment when I truly realised just how hard acting was. My respect for the craft of acting sort of, you know, went to the stratosphere. I was watching a stage version of 12 angry men and a Jeff fire actually was that playing juror number three, he's the angry juror that breaks down at the end, do you remember, and he asked all the crying and everything, and this was the stage version, and he, obviously it happens, he breaks down and everything. Then the curtain comes down, then the curtain comes up and there's like, everyone's bowing and I looked at Jeff because I was near the front of the audience and obviously his character was crying and tearing up in the show. But this was about five minutes later, he was still crying like, there were still tears coming from his eyes, even though he was bowing and smiling. I thought, what is, he must have pulled some really bad memory up, because that was real. I know he was acting the part of someone who was, you know, breaking down, but he must have, he was doing the things that someone who had a breakdown had done. And I thought, oh God, this must be incredible. I mean, what, why would you choose to do such a thing? Did you always want to be an actor? Tell our listeners how you got on the, you know, the first steps along the way of the craft.

When I was young, I watched a lot of films, you know, first off I wanna just say, just address what you just said. It's really interesting in the sense that your body does not know that you're acting, your body and your psyche does not know that you're acting. So, when you go through these things, especially on stage, live in front of an audience, you know, when you're on stage for a period of like, you know, two to four hours or whatever, your body doesn't know you're acting, so you've done all the work and then you go through the process of the play, and you set yourself up to go through all of these emotions. But yeah, there's a lot of, you know, it's real, when you're crying, you're crying. If you're, you know, if you're a good actor, you know, that's, you're going through all of those emotions. So, when I was a kid, I was really into that, I was really into theatre. My parents took me to see a lot of plays in New York, off Broadway, off, off Broadway, Broadway. You know, I got to see a whole lot of live theatre and I also got to see a whole lot of live rock and roll cause my parents were, you know, really cool in the sense that like they would take me to see rock and roll shows that kids weren't really allowed into like places like Max's Kansas city. Like, for example, I saw this band out of Manchester, the first punk band that really came over to the states called Eddie and the Hot Rods, and I got to see them live in Max's Kansas city. You know, when I was like, I don't know, 12 years old or something, you know? And so this idea of live performance was really alive inside of me. I really wanted to do it and I didn't know if I, you know, and I was in a lot of rock and roll bands at that age when I was a kid. But what I was really into was this added bonus of, wow, you could be an actor, you could develop characters and you could perform them live on stage like rock and roll. So, I talked to my mom about it and my dad about it, you know, my dad was like, yeah, that's a pipe dream, you know, he's a business person. My mom was like, okay, man, let's find you a school. So she found me a school and she started taking me to classes when I was like 12 years old at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts and I really got into it because my teachers were, you know, older people, professional actors

and, you know, working actors. I mean, they were like, you know, doing Broadway plays and films and stuff and then they were coming and teaching kids on Saturday afternoons. So, you know, they were very serious, like, the first play I ever did was by Eugene Ionesco, you know, and it was, just this completely out there, absurdist piece of art, you know, we were doing stuff like that. They were treating us like adults and I really dug it. We were doing a lot of sense memory work and a lot of emotional work that I would never have done as a 12 year old kid, you know. I mean, I was, you know, going back in my memory and cataloging, you know, my thoughts, my emotionality, my life, what, who I am, you know, that's what studying, acting brings you into. It's a real examination of who you are as a person, you gotta know yourself, you gotta know every aspect of yourself. You have to know what makes you tick. You gotta know what turns you on, what turns you off. You gotta know everything about yourself because that's your, those are your tools, your own emotions are your tools. So I was really into a lot of stuff like psychology and doing a lot of reading. When I was in seventh grade, I got sent to the principal because I asked the librarian for a book by Nietzche. She took me to the principal's office and the guy was like…

For a savage beating, I hope!

Yeah! Because I was reading about Rambo and I was reading about, you know, all these writers. So I was like, oh, they, you know, I read about this guy named Nietzche. So I wanted to, like, read him, you know, and they sent me to the principal's office. So I was in a different world. I mean, I grew up in New Jersey and I had a beautiful life in Jersey with all these, I had so many friends and like I said, I was in rock and roll bands, and I just had a great social life. Like, you know, I had a dirt bike, you know, I mean, I just had a great life. But then I had this other life, you know, that I kept totally secret where I was studying acting, you know, in New York, and I was really serious about it. I was never into, at that age, being an actor, I didn't wanna be a kid actor. I wanted to, like, study all I could and grow up and get to the point where I was living in New York and working as an actor, and then I felt like, oh, you know, then I'll work So I went through three schools of training. The American Academy was sort of like a generalized training. It was a great introduction to what acting is and what goes into it, and then after that, I went to Lee Strasberg's school and that's where I did a lot of sense memory work and a lot of relaxation, physical work, where you explore your emotional life. Then after that, I went to Stella Adler's school where I learned about dealing with a script and I learned about, you know, truthfulness, and I learned about how important it is to know history of the theater, to know about, you know, from the Romans and Greeks onto, you know, the group theater, you know, Stanislavski all that beautiful Russian stuff. And, you know, and really know the history of the theater. I was really lucky because back then, even when I was a kid, I mean, I got to meet some people who were in the group theater and in, you know, people I've read about, I was hanging out with and able to ask questions. One day Stella came into the Saturday class and she watched the class and then after the class, she said, come here and I came over and she said "I want to invite you to my class, my adult class, could you do that?" And I said, yeah, and I got there, my mom drove me, you know, it was nighttime. I was in the city at night to do something. I was blown away by that. I was like 15 years old and went to her class and kept real quiet, and then afterwards she would allow me to go and hang out with her in her dressing room when she was taking off her makeup and stuff and ask her questions. Which to me was the most amazing thing that I could, it was unimaginable to me because she was a part of history. She was Stella Adler. She taught Marlon Brando, you know, she was in the original group theater with, you know, Harold Clurman and Clifford, all my heroes, you know, so I got to ask her questions and one day, one night she said to me, never go to sleep unless you've changed the world that day. And I, you know, I was 15 years old, so like, wow, okay. What, what does that mean? Now I'm gonna spend the rest of my life trying to figure out what that means. So what it meant to me was add something creative to the world every single day, whether you're doing a play or this or that, and that's where my, my paintings come in, because I figure if I do a painting or add to

a painting, then I've changed the world that day in my little way, I've added something to it. And it just gave me a work ethic that stuck with me all my life, that, you know, to be an actor compared to being a brain surgeon, the level of importance on that is that brain surgeons save people's lives, actors don't of course, they're just actors. But when I was a kid and I was looking at actors like Montgomery Clift, and, you know, Jimmy Dean, and, you know, I mean, you name it, man, all these amazing actors that these people watching them, watching these films changed my life completely and brought me to a place where, I mean, I'm, you know, where I'm still doing what I was doing back when I was, you know, 12 years old in my adult life. And, you know, it gave me a life, it gave me a purpose, you know, in life to be an actor. And, you know, so I think it's, you know, it's a pretty important thing, you know, to be an actor, because what are actors doing? What are we really doing? I mean, we're trying to, like Shakespeare said, hold the mirror up to nature in the sense that, you know, it's healthy for people to look up at a screen or a stage and see themselves up there and, and see characters going through emotions that they're going through, that people are going through themselves. You know, that's why I think like political theater and stuff like that is really important, which is what the group theater back in the thirties and forties, you know, were really into. They, for example, did a play called, waiting for lefty, which was about a taxi strike. And back then everybody went to the theater, it wasn't just, you know, wealthy people who could afford it, you know, the tickets everybody went and, at the end of the play, they get up and they say “strike, strike strike!” And, and the whole audience got up and said, “strike, strike, strike” because there were all these cab drivers and all these working people in the audience. It led to a lot of change in workers' lives, the group theater. That was actually the first, professional play I ever did was waiting for lefty. That's how I got my equity card, you know, from that play. And, you know, so I feel it's, you know, it's really important. I mean, we're doing a public service. If you think of, you know, theater all the way back to the Greeks, I mean, you know, that was a really important thing, to go to the theater, to experience the theater, and if you look at the size of those amphitheaters back then, you know, a lot of people went, a lot of people attended the theater back then it, it meant a hell of a lot, you know, it was, it was religion and it was thought, you know, it was just about life and about the afterlife and about the, you know, imagination and, you know, that's where stuff really takes flight. So it's, that's why I'm an actor. You know what I mean? I really love.

I loved it, I loved hearing it. Do you think there's an element sometimes of actors not speaking up for the profession because, you know, they always joke, oh, it's faintly embarrassing. Like they're not brain surgeons, but actually, as you very eloquently said, there Michael, you're making a huge difference in society holding a mirror up to us, letting us reflect on where we're headed, entertaining us. It is incredibly important, and it does change lives.

But it's also a bit embarrassing. I mean, I heard a story about, like, you know, way back, like, Gene Hackman, Robert Duvall and Dustin Hoffman shared an apartment at one point and they were actors. I think it was Gene Hackman talking about how embarrassed they were to not have jobs during the day to not be working and that they would go, you know, and hide out really in movie theaters because they didn't have a job to show up to, they were working in the theater at night. So there is some sort of embarrassment of, wow, you know, what am I, you know, what am I doing? I mean, you know, that guy's working a bulldozer, this guy's doing this and I'm going and performing plays or I'm shooting a TV show. So I totally get that, and I have felt that, like, really all my life, but the thing is when you're an actor in New York and you're doing theater man and making no money and, you know, sometimes you even have to kind of pay, you know, to do theater where you, you know, in New York back then anyway, and, you know, so you gotta have other jobs, right? So you pick all these, all these different jobs to have, which, you know, helps the embarrassment because not only are you working your ass off or, you know, rehearsing a play and then performing it for people, uh, you're also, you know, maybe doing three or four jobs working as a carpenter and working in a restaurant, or

working as a proofreader, or doing this or that. So actors work damn hard, man, both at acting and at other jobs trying to support themselves. And then, you know, you're shooting a TV show, you're working, like, insanely long hours, and it's really hard to do, man, because you gotta keep up your energy, you gotta keep up what you're doing, you know, it ain't easy, man. It's a very hard life, you know, to be any kind of an artist, but, you know, to be an actor, it's rough man, because, you know, it depends on how you look or this, that, so many different things, you know, it's so hard to get a job, you know, and a lot of people, man, you know, they're devoted to acting and they get very few jobs and they just work and work and work and work very hard. And so it's sort of a thankless kind of thing, but it could be very thankful too.

It's also like many things in life. It's a bit random, isn't it? As to whether you succeed or not, because I had a guy called Ken Hertz on the podcast a couple of years ago, a really nice guy, Hollywood lawyer. And he said, you know, Beyonce is incredibly talented and she deserves success. He said, but, and I don't mean this to depict Beyonce, but she's like one of 50 people who are as good at dancing and singing as she is. And yet they're waiting tables because they weren't discovered, you've obviously got to have the creative flare, the talent and the hard work, but then it's random as to whether you, you face fits and, and that, you know, you get people in Hollywood waiting tables for 30 years, I think Harrison Ford took like 35 years before he got Star Wars. It must be incredibly debilitating because you're not earning money, you're having to wait tables, you're resting between jobs. You know, you almost think that no sane person would choose this other than the fact that they must be completely dedicated to the love of acting.

Yeah, I mean, you know, absolutely. I mean, you've gotta be a bit insane, you know, to devote your life to that. Absolutely, it's like a calling, you know, it's almost like a curse. It's like, you know, if you're going to be an actor, if you wanna be an actor in order to be famous, you know, that's one thing, you know, and it's a completely different experience, but if you wanna be an actor because you just can't do anything else, like me, there was nothing else in the world that, that I was gonna be able to do because I had no interest. I had a very, very deep interest in being an actor, so I became an actor, but I didn't even think about doing anything else, you know? And, like, you know, that's like, it's like a calling, it's like, you can't help it. You were born that way. It's like, you know, it's a trip, you know? And, you know, it's sort of like you, you have no choice and the life that is ahead of you is, you know, it's very difficult, and like my dad would always say, you know, it's Frank Sinatra is not the greatest singer in the world. He just, you know, got lucky. He got the gigs and, you know, a guy next to him, you know, in Hoboken might have been a better singer than him, you know, but never got the break. And, you know, that's crazy, you know, I mean, it's just insane. How many talented people are very untalented at getting the jobs and how many kind of untalented people are very, very talented at getting jobs. So it's very difficult, you know, to, you know, to navigate that, to swallow that it's really hard, you know, man. That's why I love listening to Alan Lomax who recorded a lot of music for the library of Congress, because what he did is he went around with a tape recorder all over the world really, but mainly in the states, you know, and he went through Appalachia and through the Mississippi Delta and, you know, through the whole country and through Europe, you know, and he would go into a town and say, you know, who's your songster? Who do you go listen to? And, somebody would say, well, go check out Almeda Riddle. She lives down that block and right in that house, and he would knock on her door and introduce himself and say, can I record you singing songs? He would record people in their houses on their porch. He recorded guys who were in chain gangs, you know, in the field, and, you know, every single one of these people is completely unknown, you know, like, you know, and they're the greatest musicians ever, you know? I mean, I've been listening to these people since I was a kid, you know, these obscure just people who weren't musicians, they were farmers, they were doing whatever they were doing, but they just happened to be just absolutely brilliant, you know, at singing songs, historical songs that have been, you know, in

the, in the world for, you know, forever. And, you know, so there's, yeah, it's a shot in the dark if you're gonna ever get a job. I mean, there are actors who never got a job. There are singers who are singing in, you know, little obscure bars in the back of, you know, hotels, you know, who are just the most brilliant people ever. And, I think, I don't know, I think it's very inspiring to, you know, people, I think people like that are very inspiring because they just can't help it. They cannot help but do what they do, no matter if they're making a living at it or not, you know, and then there are a lot of other people who really don't even like being actors and they have no real interest in it at all. And yet, you know, they get the gigs and they become very famous and then they get people behind them who help them in their careers and they're movie stars. And they, they just have no value for it at all.

I know a very famous Hollywood actor, who's the partner of another client of ours, who is also a very famous Hollywood actor, and he doesn't like acting. And I just find, I said, well, why are you doing it? And he's like, well, it's, I don't mind. It's very, very good money. And I get, you know, and I was like, wow, but I mean, a lot of people. He called it golden handcuffs because he enjoys the money and the doors that it opens and he doesn't particularly dislike his job as an actor, but he doesn't, like, he would say he doesn't dislike it enough to do something about it. So, he's in that, like, middle gear type situation. But I was gonna ask 'cause like you have the opposite problem don't you, which is that you portrayed Chucky so well that you can almost, you know, you get typecast in a sense or maybe, do you run the risk of that, because there you are in the airport tucking into a burger, someone's looking at your finger saying, oh, he's not Chucky. He's an actor. As if that's somehow they ought to know, there's a bizarre relationship, isn't it where they feel, they know you, but they actually only know the character you play and that literally isn't you. And also, are you punished for playing him so well? Because you're never gonna play a character halfheartedly, are you? You don't just think, well, I won't give it full pelt just in case I get typecast. You give it your all and then you're almost punished for it.

Exactly. Yes, I mean, I was talking to Ron, we were doing some event and we were in an airport, waiting for a plane and I'm like, man, I cannot get another gig, any other gigs. I walk into the room and they're like, oh it's Chucky, and, you know, and no matter what, no matter if I shave or I, you know, whatever, you know, it's like, oh that's Chucky. And, it's like, I feel like they're saying like, you know, why would we hire Chucky, you know, for our show or for our film. And anyway, I was talking to Ryan and he was like, yeah, maybe you played him too well, you know, it's odd, man. I spent my whole life, you know, doing plays, doing live work, and then doing independent films and, and doing, all the New York shows, you know, like homicide and all the New York City TV stuff. And, you know, and that's, I was on all the Law and Orders, I was on nine times playing nine different characters on those shows. So it's like, you know, I'm used to playing different people all the time like in the theatre, you know, you have a run for a month or six months or this or that, you know, but then you do another character and another character and another character. Then, you know, when I was on SOA, a lot of people of course, you know, saw me as Chucky, and I played him in a pretty believable way. I guess when someone, when an audience sees an actor who they've never seen before, they're not really, I guess it's a compliment in the sense that they saw the character as opposed to seeing Michael Ornstein because that's my goal, right, but I think people in the business maybe think I really am this guy, you know? I would notice like I was out in LA and my manager was sending me for all these things, and I would look around the room at the other guys who were reading for the same role I was reading for, and they were like, you know, older guys. They looked like Chucky, all of them, but then there was me and I was sitting there looking completely, not like Chucky and you know, going for a role that a guy who is kind of like Chucky would get, but I would get none of those roles because that's not what I was really presenting. I presented that aspect of myself for Chucky, but you know, just as easily, you know, I could have played other characters on that show or on other shows 'cause I'm a character actor and I develop, what I do is, I think what I do is I take, I think what kind of actor I

am and what I offer is that I can deal with very complicated dialogue, very complicated characters, and I could make them real and I could make complicated dialogue natural. And I think that comes from so many years in the theatre working on new plays and stuff. And it's like, yeah, man, it's, it's kind of unfortunate to be, you know, seen as only one character when, when my life blood is to be a character actor and to develop a lot of different characters, like I did all my life, you know? So, yeah, man, it is kind of a strange thing and I'm trying to break out of Chucky, you know, and I would love to play different people, you know?

Sure. I'm sure you.

I would love to play the normal guy.

Yeah. I want to talk to you about it as you were saying, those other guys look like Chucky. I was thinking, well, Michael looks pretty much like Chucky as well, given that you were, but I know what you mean. Like in terms of the essence of the character.

You know, guys, you know, I would go and I'd look around the room and there would be guys who were, you know, really, you know, like kind of, you know, khakis and, and this and that, you know, I mean like Chucky, you know what I mean?

It's weird, isn't it? 'Cause like you, when, I grew up watching Beauty and the Beast where obviously Ron Pearlman played the beast and Linda played the beauty and like, I believed that he was the beast and then you get into Sons of Anarchy and I show me an old, still photo of Beauty and the beast, and my first thought was, why is Clay wearing makeup? Looking like a lion? Do you know what I mean? It's strange, it's I think sort of five or six years from now, the minute you get another gig that's well known and that takes advantage of your many talents. They'll think of you as that person. It's almost half of the cause, isn't it? I was gonna say, 'cause my wife is an author and that whole reconciliation of, you know, the creative drive, but having to also, you know, pay the mortgage and earn money and all of that, that to me seems to be unacting like in terms of like, does that get you down? How a producer will look at your name on a spreadsheet and say, okay, that will give us a boost of three points. Whereas if it's Tom cruise, it might be 82 points or you're commoditized, I suppose, is what I'm saying. That's not really why you got into acting, is it? To be reduced to a number on a spreadsheet?

No, that's not why I went into it. I mean, I just, I hardly know what a spreadsheet is, you know what I mean? It's like, there's a lot of with me. I mean, there's always a lot of mystery that I like to deal with, you know, as far as like getting, you know, doing roles and doing things, it's like a mystical experience, really, for me, it's just the greatest kind of work because it's extremely hard to do. And it calls for using every aspect of myself and my memories and my perspectives and my physical body and this and that. It's just totally immersive. And, you know, it's like a very personal thing. So to put, a price tag on it for me is not really something that I think about mainly because I've never really been paid a whole lot of money. When you think of, in terms of, you know, the kind of money that actors get paid, I have certainly never, reached that point as an actor to be making, you know, my wife works full time and, you know, we're living not lavishly on any level our kids go to public school. We, you know, I, we don't have a ton of money. And even when I was doing SOA, you know, we didn't have a ton of money. You know, my wife was working full time throughout that whole time. So it's like, I can't really speak to, you know, making a whole lot of money and having that be my motivation, although I made more money than, than I ever made on that. And it afforded me, you know a lot of things that I'm

extremely thankful for, but for me, it's, you know, it's, I would love to make, you know, to have it be more of a business. And I think, you know, to think about that is I would love to make an actual living, you know, as an actor and have my wife not have to work full time and all that. I would love that man. And I feel like, if I did do that, I would still be the same kind of actor that I am now. I don't think it would, it would change me on any level or, I don't feel I would lose anything. I know a lot of people, you know, when I was younger, we would talk about actors and musicians and ah, they sold out, they did this, they sold out, you know, I mean, Hey man, I don't know. I don't really buy that really. You know, I feel like if a musician, you know, becomes very famous and makes a whole lot of money and, and does their thing and maintains, you know, their artistry, that's great, man. I mean, look at Bob Dylan, you know, or Bruce Springsteen or, you know, anyone look at Sean Penn or, you know, you know, these great artists who make great livings and, but they're still artists. They, they make great livings, but they deliver stuff that can change your life. You know, I mean, listening to a David Bowie record, if you you're a musician with listening to diamond dogs can change your entire life, your whole life's perspective, your musical perspective. And, you know, so there's always been money, I guess, involved in the arts. And, the artists were always the last to make the money, you know, throughout history but to motivate by money is never a good idea. Whether you're painting, you know, no matter what kind of an artist you are. Getting back to brain surgery, if you're a brain surgeon and you're in it for the money, I hope I never have a brain problem and meet someone like that. I want to go to the brain surgeon who's in it because they just can't do anything else, and it they're obsessed by it. And it just, you know, it gives them bliss to do their job and yeah, and they get paid, you know, but that's secondary, you know what I mean?

The rule is do what you love and the money will flow really, or it largely does. You shouldn't do it primarily for the money, and I agree with you. I was gonna ask before we move on to, obviously incredible artistry, I wanted to ask a couple of final questions on acting. One is, you know, actors often make forays into the political arena. You stepped in rightly, to back up your colleague, Ron Pearlman, 'cause he got into that political Twitter row over taking the knee, you know, is this the Taylor swift problem where everyone says to Taylor swift, or you should get involved in politics? You know, you've got a platform you should encourage young girls to be involved. And then the minute she then says, Trump is not a good president and you should vote Democrat. Half of her fan base are like, shut up bitch. What? Just sing your songs. What the hell's it gotta do with you? Do you know what I mean? You can't win and it's disgusting how she's been treated. She's damned as she does damned if she doesn't. I mean, do you like it that having a certain notoriety helps you have that influence? Or is it that people then just come back and say shut up Chucky, you know, you know, and do your acting. It's nothing to do with you because really you shouldn't really be trying to win over people like that anyway. They can't be reasoned with, they're idiots.

It's like, you know, we're just people, I mean, we're artists, but we're people, we're citizens and we have to have perspectives. I mean, like you have to have political perspectives and you know, but the thing about like Twitter, like, you know, yeah. People take it very personally. Like people feel tied to an artist, right? They feel like they know them. They feel like they're like them. They feel like the artists that they love are, you know,, they're similar to each other. So when you see an, when someone sees an artist who they feel that way about and they feel a connection to, and that artist, all of a sudden has a completely different political view than you do. You know, you get, you get weirded out. You, you know, you get insulted, you might hate them and politics the way it is now, especially in the states for the past six years or so, you know, is like a battle it's never, I mean, it's different from the way it's been and you know, people are, look at other people, look at other, you know, Americans as real enemies. I mean, it's really hateful and there's a big deal happening politically. It's very complicated. So if you're doing it, if you're voicing your opinion on Twitter in a tweet, that's one thing, if you are writing a song about your perspective and you know, it's out there. Well, that's a whole other thing, if

you're doing something that, you know, like if you're writing a play about your political perspective, like Arthur Miller did, like Tony Kushner did like, like so many brilliant writers, do they write about their, political perspectives through, you know, through, through plays through songs, through books, through scripts, you know, that's a whole other thing, you know, so I like to put my political concepts into my writing and into my paintings. And I like to act in things that are socially relevant and that have perspectives, especially theater. I think theater is a, is a really great political tool. I was lucky enough to be friends with Howard Zinn, the historian and he wrote people's history of the United States. And, you know, back after nine 11, you know, when we invaded Iraq and all that stuff, I made a documentary film and I went to Boston and interviewed Howard about this situation. And then I went up to, Winnipeg, Manitoba, and I interviewed a bunch of Canadians about American foreign policy. So I mean, and that's what I did. I went and made films. I've always loved interviewing people, you know? So I love to interview people on their political perspectives. I love to do stuff like that, but like on Twitter, I feel like every time I put out a political tweet or something like that, I just feel like, man, I don't know. I don't know if that's for me anyway, the way to do it. I would rather put up a painting that carries my perspective more than, you know, writing about, about some, you know, atrocity, the latest atrocity, you know, that, that has happened. And, you know, when the atrocities are coming at full speed, like, you know, 50 a minute, you know, it's rough. I mean, what are you gonna address? You know, I mean, how many political perspectives can you, you know, how, you know, it's like that, whackamole, you know, every time you whack, you know, you send out tweet, that's political, you know, another 10 things come up, how many things are, are you going to address? You know, so I don't know. I'm a little bent with like, you know, Twitter and Instagram and TikTok and, and all of that. Anyway, I feel like it's a lot more important, like Lee Strasberg used to say, put it into the work, you know, and that's, you know, I mean, like The Grapes of Wrath was written from a, a political, a social perspective and that's gonna be with us, you know, forever. And, you know, if he would've, you know, been very active instead of writing The Grapes of Wrath, you know, very active on social media, you know, it would've been different, you know, and that's not to say that so many people giving their political perspectives on Twitter, it's very valid. It's extremely valid, you know, no matter where you're coming from, it's extremely valid, but in terms of like artists and, and stuff like that, if you are an artist you have to rely on, you have to have faith in the sense that your art carries a lot more weight and, and speaks a lot louder and also carries a lot lo a lot more longevity, you know, than a tweet.

Absolutely. And I want to talk about the other ways that you express yourself as an artist. Because I mean, you are an incredible painter. Tell us about your oil paintings. You invite people to watch you at work on social media. You've written stories that go alongside the paintings. I mean, it's truly a kind of multimedia painting experience. I mean, that's fascinating to talk our listeners through it, through if you can, through the journey and how things are going.

Well, when I was a kid, my mom painted, and there was, there were always, canvases and paints, you know, in the house, and she never really encouraged me. She just had, they were just there, it was something that she did. And, you know, when you're a kid, you go to school and you learn how to paint and you're painting and I just never stopped. And I always wanted to be drawing or painting, putting colours together. And it just lasted my whole life. You know, this love of colours and this love of paint and this, you know, the technical aspects of mixing colours and working from pigment and the different types of oils that you could use and the different types of paints that you could use and this and that. And I always kept my paintings relatively secret, you know, and I never really, you know, showed in galleries. I always showed just in alternative places, you know, in New York restaurants that I liked, little diners and bars and, you know, stuff like that. That was kind of what I did. And since I was an actor and I loved writing as well, and I was dealing as an actor with all new materials. So I was really like when you're dealing with all new material and new plays and stuff, you learn how to write. You have to, you know, and you, you know, you're working with a writer and everything is fluid and

liquid. And, you know, you're rehearsing and the script is changing because you're suggesting or you're going here or there. So performance became something that I wanted to try to deal with through my paintings. So early on way back, like in the eighties, I always tried to bring my paintings into the realm of performance. And I've been trying to figure out how to do this since, you know, 1982, basically. So in the past, what I've done is I built live shows, like, I wrote little stories, like, monologues, and I would perform them, like, with the, a painting up there with me. And then around 2006, I discovered QR codes, and what I did with the QR codes is that for live exhibitions, I would have a QR code next to the painting. And, you would, you know, hit the QR code and it would link you to an audio file, which was me basically, you know, telling a story, speaking from the perspective of the painting. So you could go from painting to painting, to painting listening to the paintings, talking to you. And I thought that was pretty cool but no one knew back in 2006, what a QR code was. So it was like hard. So I would be at the exhibition and I would have, you know, go around, say, go download this and do this and do that. And then, you know, I saw that it really turned people on. It was a really cool thing. And I continue to do that to this day, you know, and there's a lot of ways to do it digitally. You know, I just wanted to make my paintings active, really. I wanted to make them more than paintings because I always like wrote things on my paintings. And, you know, words have always been connected to my paintings as far as I was concerned. And then remember this guy in a gallery in Vermont, you know, he would just like, I wanted to show my paintings there. And he said, man, you know, I just hate it. When people write on paintings, I feel like it's like, you know an insult to the art. And I thought, well, okay, man, you know, and, you know, I never showed it at that gallery, you know? But, you know, I showed at other places that didn't mind that kind of stuff, because I feel like, you know, art should be wide open. And also a lot of people, you know, don't go to galleries, you know, don't go to museums, they don't go to places where they see paintings. A lot of people feel like, you know, paintings are these special things that, you know, that only incredibly wealthy people can have, and this and that. And, as far as I was concerned, you know, growing up my parents again, man, always, I was really lucky. I grew up like 20 minutes from Manhattan. So, you know, my parents would take me to museums and they would take me to all the museums, the Met, the Guggenheim, all the fifth avenue museums and, um, MoMA, you know, and, uh, everything. But my favourite museum kind of, you know, my favourite art experience was down in what is now known as Soho. My parents would take me downtown where all the artists were squatting in these gigantic lofts. So we would go to this place called food and have some lunch and then look on the bulletin board and look for open studios. And then we would write down the addresses and we would go to these studios where we were able to see artists working in their environments. And, you know, I would just go and sit on the floor and just stare at these artists who were, like, creating these paintings or sculptures or doing whatever they were doing and what was so cool is that they never paid any attention to me. So I was able to just be myself, you know, and not be self conscious and just sit there and watch them. And I think that's what made me into a painter because, you know, I was a little kid and it was just so magical to me and, and these gigantic dark lofts, you know, that had no electric, you know, they would steal electricity, you know, from the street they were squatting and, you know, so it was just so mysterious to me. And so, incredible to watch people, instead of looking at a finished painting at the met here, I was looking at an artist creating a painting that may one day be at the met, you know, and it was just the experience that they were going through their process that made me into an artist, that made me into a painter. I wanted to live inside of the process that I was looking at. And so that's an element of performance. You know, I was an audience member. I was sitting on the floor of a raw loft, watching someone create gigantic paintings, sculptures, whatever they were painting that to me, reminded me very much of the theatre that I was also being exposed to. And I'm talking about, you know, I was young, I was a little kid, you know, and it made a very big impression on me. And, it was so different you know, from anything that I was experiencing in New Jersey for God's sake, you know, and you know, it was just something that not a lot of, look, nobody I knew was doing that, you know, back then. And, you know, so it was something that I was able to, you know, have for myself, it was just this secret world. So anyway, I think that's why I wanted to, uh, to add an element of

performance to my paintings. My paintings tell stories. I look at them as like still frame films. I look at them, I want every one of my paintings to tell a story. Every one of them, no matter what they are. And I paint a lot of people I want,

I was gonna ask you actually like, you know, what does acting and painting have in common, but I think you've already, mostly answered it, haven't you? That the two flip sides are the same coin aren't they? It's about people, it's about art. Do you value both equally in your mind? Or would you prefer to be painting than acting?

I think that, um, well you're totally right. It's all the same stream. It's like writing, painting and acting. I see them all as one thing, you know, I really, I don't really delineate, like when I'm writing, I'm writing from the perspective of a character, of all the characters that I'm writing, I'm inhabiting every single character and you have to be kind of acting in your mind and keeping truthful. What would this character say? What would that character say? And it's not like you're thinking about it, it's gotta be intuitive. You just, it's just gotta flow out of you. When I'm acting and creating a character and then performing that character. It's kind of the same thing as writing a character and having them just speak through you, and then painting, I'm painting characters. And sometimes quite often I write dialogue, I write words onto the actual painting. So, primarily I consider myself a painter and acting, writing, those are two things that I also am very serious about doing, and I put a lot of work into, getting better into figuring out what it means to be a writer or an actor. But primarily I always, since I was a little kid, you know, saw myself as a visual artist as a painter. And I feel like, you know, that's, that identity allows me to, you know, to be, to be free with what I'm doing, because I feel like, well, I like to create a lot of original work, you know? So I feel like, well, this idea, this is a painting, or, you know what, this is a, this is a prose book, or this is a script, whatever I want to express, I find a genre for it and then I express it. But primarily, yeah, I consider myself a painter.

What's next for you? You can, I mean, you could easily be happily doing this for the next 20, 30, 40 years, but do you want to take your art in a certain direction? Where do you see the next, sounds like a job interview, isn't it, but like, where do you see yourself in 20 years? Michael?

Yeah, I mean, look, I tried to use the pandemic as a time where I was gonna figure that out. And I said to myself, okay man, all my life, I wanted to just paint and just focus on painting. And, you know, when am I gonna do that? Is that ever gonna happen? So I couldn't act, you know, during the pandemic. So I just painted and I wrote, and that's all I did. And I was quite happy. And I came up with a brand new style that really looks a hell of a lot like my first paintings, you know, the first paintings that I ever did, you know? So I came kind of full circle on that. And I mean, I'm, right now, I'm writing a story, a big story that has to do with the mysticism, the world of the American road. And it's juxtaposed with a historical fiction about Billy the kid. And it's a big, big story that encompasses, you know, 1883 or 1881 up till, you know, up to the present basically. And I'm using my paintings and I'm writing and I'm writing it into a prose form. And then I'm writing, I already have a script form for it. And I have an overview that tells the story, the entire landscape of the story and the prose version. I'm using my paintings to help tell the story, and I also have aspirations to do this live, you know, to tell the story, live with musicians and use imagery from my paintings to help tell the story. I mean, that, that to me would be the ultimate, if I could do that, you know, cause that's what I've always done. I mean, I've been doing that since the early eighties, but I want to understand what it would be like, you know, to do it now, you know, at my age now having lived all the, all these years, you know, as an artist, as an actor and a writer, you know, who's really into, you know, putting up my own original writing, you know, with my friends, and to, you know, and to see what that looks like now, I would love to get back to live performance, you know, to theatre and, you know, and just continue to

do, I guess, what I've always done, which is like, you know, when I get an acting job, I'm an actor when I'm not doing an acting job, you know, I'm the person who, I'm the kind of person, I'm the type of person who needs to wake up in the morning and go to work and being an artist, especially being an actor, it's really hard because, you know, it's insanely rare that actors go to work, man. So, you know, I had to give myself something to do every day. So, you know, during the pandemic, like every day I woke up really early and went to work, started painting or started writing. So it's like for me, I just really would love to be able to show my paintings and sell them and write and just put it all together and move forward, you know, with that. In the sense that I would love to do stuff that uses all those elements together at the same time, I really dig that. That's when I feel likeI'm operating on all pistons.

We've been chatting for, well over an hour, Michael. And that's because you're such an interesting person, but I think we're running out of metaphorical tape. So I've got one final question to ask you, even though we could go on for hours and hours.

Okay.

How do our listeners get in touch with you and find out about your work? And do you have a website address?

Yeah. MichaelOrnstein.com. and you could go there. You could follow me on Twitter. My Twitter handle is @swimdeep. One word S W I M D E E P. On Instagram, it's kind of hard to follow me because I am very complicated about Instagram. So I keep deleting accounts and I keep forming new accounts and, you know, this and that, but currently my handle is @listenbreathevision that's my Instagram. And I'm always doing something. I'm always doing something new and putting it out there online. And, yeah. So you could follow me through all of those things. And they're always changing. Like I always saw Twitter and Instagram and social media stuff as creative venues. When I first started with Twitter in 2009, I wrote live on Twitter. I wrote stories live on Twitter. One time I opened up four accounts, four different Twitter accounts, and they were characters to a play. I was writing live. So I was dealing with my wife's side phone, her computer, my iPhone, my computer, and then an iPad. And I was tweeting from different accounts and they were all speaking to each other while an audience followed it. And I did that like, for like a few months, every Friday night. And I would just write stuff live. I was, like, writing dialogue live. It was like improvising four characters, you know, live on Twitter, you know, so I do stuff like that. So it's kind of interesting to follow, maybe. I don't know, who knows,

Michael, that was a hugely interesting conversation. Thank you ever so much for your time.

That was so fun. I love talking to you about all the great questions.

Well, wasn't that amazing? It was created and produced by podcast partners. They're really lovely people and rather good at all this podcasting guff find out more at podcastpartners.com.