“How do you help them live in front of a camera?”: What James Blue Learned from Directors of Non-Actors

By Richard Herskowitz (copyright 2026)

In the mid-1960s, on a Ford Foundation grant, filmmaker James Blue set out to talk to the directors who had made the most compelling use of non-professional performers on screen — the Italian neorealists, French New Wave artists, practitioners of cinema verité, and a scattering of others working outside the studio system. He had directed non-actors himself with, he felt, mixed results in his first narrative feature, *The Olive Trees of Justice,* winner of the Cannes Critics’ Prize in 1962. He wanted to know how other directors did it-- how they found their non-actors, how they got authentic behavior and performances out of people who had never faced a camera, and how they shaped that raw material into finished film.

The conversations that resulted amount to a hidden education in directing — not a theory, but a set of hard-won practical lessons, gathered from Roberto Rossellini, Jean-Luc Godard, Shirley Clarke, Bernardo Bertolucci, Claude Jutra, Satyajit Ray, John Boorman, Jean Renoir, and others. What follows traces those lessons chronologically, from the earliest scouting and scripting through the final pass in the dubbing studio. 50 of the full interviews, seven of which were published in *Film Comment* in the 1960s, have been compiled and are being released by Sticking Place Press in November in a three-volume collection titled *Directing the Non-Actor: The James Blue Interviews.*

Writing from Life

Nearly every director Blue spoke with described a script that stayed open to what the world handed them, rather than one written in isolation and imposed on reality.

Renato Castellani took this furthest, building his screenplays out of what amounted to ethnographic fieldwork. *Under the Sun of Rome* (1948) began when he set out to dictate a scene to his young stenographer and found himself far more interested in the young man's own life. "So I said, look, why don't you take some paper and write down whatever comes into your head," Castellani recalled. He followed the young man to the pool hall, the bar, the café, taking notes all the while, and "from all this material came" the film. *Two Cents Worth of Hope* (1952) began the same way, with a Neapolitan soldier Castellani met in Rome and invited home to tell his family's stories aloud while a stenographer transcribed. Castellani assembled the transcript into a "mosaic" of dialogue and credited the soldier as its author.

When Blue asked for advice on scripting a film about his own Oklahoma family, Castellani gave him the same method in miniature: "Go and interview people and they'll tell you everything. They'll write your film themselves. All you have to do is take what they say and choose what to

keep." Blue and his collaborator Gill Dennis took the advice literally, recording hours of family interviews and drafting a script, *Watch for the Razor Act*, that was never produced but survives in the University of Oregon Libraries' James Blue archive.

Vittorio De Seta described the same openness in blunter terms. The script, he told Blue, "is something that exists on paper and is not gospel." Casting could upend it entirely: for *Bandits of Orgosolo* (1961), the young shepherd written into the script at twenty-three or twenty-four became, once De Seta met the non-actor he wanted, a man of thirty-five. "You can be programmatic and obey the script as you do in many industrial films, but you'll have made a mistake," he said. "You change the scenario and adapt it to what life has given you."

Casting from the Street

Finding the right non-actor was, for most of these directors, a matter of searching the street rather than a casting office. Castellani and Jacques Rozier both used cameras as scouting tools, shooting quick test footage of prospects encountered in public. Rozier was hunting for a specific type — a Parisian titi , streetwise, with "a certain way of moving, a certain way of chewing gum, a certain sense of repartée" — and sent teams of photographers into the city to find him, often using a woman to make the approach because, as he told Blue, men "will stop more easily if it's a girl who stops them."

What both directors were after was less a look than an inner match. "It's not just a question of the face," Castellani said, "it's a question of what's inside him... I always take the one who's psychologically closest." Francesco Rosi, casting Sicilian boys for *Salvatore Giuliano* (1962), pushed the idea further, seeking not psychological but social identification: the boys he chose were from the towns where Giuliano's story had actually unfolded, and their performances carried, he said, "a participation... that went beyond good acting from a technical point of view."

Several directors connected this to class. Castellani and Bernardo Bertolucci both found working-class non-actors brought an energy to the screen that trained, bourgeois actors often couldn't match. "The bourgeois are the hardest to work with," Castellani said flatly; "they're full of complexes." Bertolucci, compelled to cast a bourgeois actor as the bourgeois lead of *Before the Revolution* (1964), worked around his subject's inhibition rather than against it: "I showed him immobile. He never acts... A bourgeois can't begin to act because he is inhibited... It's difficult to find vitality in someone who is dead, morally."

Rozier endorsed the Bazinian ideal of mixing professionals and non-actors, as Rossellini had done, but warned that the seams could show. He described watching Jules Dassin's *The Law* (1958), where extras "recruited on the spot" stood beside professional actors dressed as fishermen: "it was something monstrous — you could see the difference, the way living conditions... modify people."

Asked how he judged whether someone could hold the screen, Gilles Groulx described a test of stillness: he would watch a prospect standing unaware of being observed and ask whether that unguarded presence already resembled the character. "If, when he's not expecting it, he looks right, that's perfect — because when I ask him to do nothing at all, it'll be fine."

Directing on Set

Blue was especially curious about techniques for eliciting performance, and found the directors split between two instincts: modeling the performance themselves, or getting out of the way entirely.

Castellani belonged to the first camp without apology. "I performed the parts myself," he told Blue, deliberately over-acting so that the non-actor's more limited "equalizer" would bring the performance back down to something natural. When Blue asked whether this risked inauthentic imitation, Castellani was unbothered: "They must imitate, exactly. I make them do things that I know they have in them." Vittorio De Sica worked the same way, according to Tullio Kezich and Gianni De Bosio, acting out every role himself in what Kezich called a distinctly Neapolitan, exterior style — De Sica, De Bosio added, "always talks with his hands."

A second technique, prompting, spread across several national traditions: feeding the non-actor lines just before the camera rolled, so there was no time to memorize or "act" them. Susumu Hani used it because, he said, "memorizing is very bad for expression." Rozier learned it from Jean-Luc Godard, who told him, "I don't give them the text to learn... I write it at the last moment," and found it worked precisely because the performer had no time to consider the meaning of the words — confirming, Rozier thought, both Robert Bresson's warning that thinking about a line guarantees saying it wrong, and Antonioni's rule of never explaining a role to an actor, "because otherwise they tend to become their own directors." What Rozier refused to do, though, was ever act a part out for his performers, citing Jean Renoir's distinction between directors who show actors how to perform and those who simply help actors "rid themselves of everything that is not themselves" and be natural. "I always had the feeling that I am an observer," Rozier said, "not that I'm projecting."

Shooting for Truth

On set, the consensus ran toward simplicity. Castellani warned against takes that ran too long — "once you've done a shot that's thirty or forty seconds, that's all you can do" — and stripped his productions down so the non-actor could forget the camera was there: no big lights, no crowd of crew standing around. Hani shot mostly in continuity for the same reason; Gilles Groulx insisted on real locations over sets, since non-actors, lacking training, needed the world's own texture

around them. Claude Jutra described giving his camera the same freedom he gave his actors, letting a scene play out in one unbroken take rather than breaking it into shots.

Blue was fascinated by an anecdote from documentarian Al Maysles, who, hired by Godard to shoot a fictional scene, simply jumped into it and filmed in vérité style with no blocking or rehearsal — precisely the effect Rozier said he and the other New Wave directors were chasing: "a documentary about characters." That instinct extended to editing. Blue's own teaching notes argued that "Hollywood production techniques impose an aesthetic not conducive to non-actors," pointing to Robert Flaherty's unbroken long take of Nanook and the walrus as proof that breaking a scene into shot/reverse-shot coats a non-actor's performance in visible artifice. He put the idea to Groulx directly, who agreed: the National Film Board tradition he came from had never used studio-style coverage. "We've always walked the streets to make our films."

Blue was candid about a failure of his own. A scene in his film *The Olive Trees of Justice*, he told Groulx, read as false to audiences even though the non-actor playing the mother spoke exactly as she always did. The fault, he concluded, was his own cutting: he had shot the scene in shot/reverse-shot, imposing a studio grammar that betrayed her performance. He connected this to something Godard had told him — that even with two cameras available, he wouldn't use them, because it would grant the viewer a "privileged position" no single observer could actually hold. Groulx agreed, comparing that privileged camera angle to the false "truth" of news coverage that shows a street accident from every angle at once.

The Paradox of Dubbing

Given how central location shooting and unrehearsed performance were to this whole tradition, it comes as a surprise how many of these same directors were comfortable dubbing their non-actors' voices afterward — a practice partly inherited from Italy's postwar studio shortages. Kezich and De Bosio described Rossellini shooting silent "in the Italian style," having actors count numbers instead of speaking lines, then inventing the dialogue afterward in the dubbing studio. Italian audiences, Kezich told Blue, were so accustomed to dubbed film that an imperfect lip-sync went unnoticed.

Vittorio De Seta used professional dubbing actors for his non-actors' voices but had to rein them in. The shepherds of *Bandits of Orgosolo* spoke in a flat, sober register, hiding their feelings, and the dubbing actors' instinct toward emphasis had to be corrected — sometimes overcorrected — in the opposite direction. Hani, working without reliable sync sound in Japan, treated the gap between image and dialogue as expressive in itself, sometimes substituting different words than the non-actor had actually said: "Language is too social, too logical, to express human beings' personal feelings... I try to make a kind of montage of the image and the language."

No one made a stronger case for dubbing than Rozier, who called it a way of finding "a certain truth through the height of artifice." Freed from matching sound to image during the shoot, he

could focus entirely on the visual performance, then rebuild the scene's spontaneity afterward in the studio, working dramatic beat by dramatic beat with the same non-actors re-performing themselves. "That spontaneity that was erased at the time of shooting was found again at the time of dubbing," he said — and, freed from the paralysis of the camera, his non-actors "became completely actors, because they could play themselves." Dubbing let him reshape a scene's whole meaning after the fact, shifting tone by intonation alone: "Even a scene that is not well shot can be completely saved by intonation."

Not everyone agreed. Satyajit Ray considered dubbing a non-actor "impossible... absolute disaster." John Boorman, shooting with newly lightweight equipment on *Having a Wild Weekend*, found he no longer needed to dub at all, even capturing dialogue live on a windy beach. And Jean Renoir, an early inspiration to the neorealists, told Blue he simply didn't believe in dubbing: the voice, he argued, is as intimately tied to a person's identity as any gesture, and separating it from the image meant depriving the audience of "something which is perhaps more intimately connected to his inner personality than his hand gestures." Renoir's ideal remained the filmmaker as "reality catcher" — a hidden observer capturing a scene the subject didn't know was being filmed.

What Held It Together

Taken together, these lessons don't resolve into a single method — the directors disagreed with each other as often as they agreed. But a shared instinct runs underneath all of it: that a non-actor's greatest asset is whatever the camera can't manufacture, and that a director's real job — whether by simplifying the set, feeding a line at the last second, or rebuilding a scene from scratch in a dubbing booth — is to protect that asset all the way to the screen.