

## JOHN TURTURRO IN CONVERSATION WITH WILL ENO



John Turturro

**J**ohn Turturro, a writer, director, and Emmy Award-winning actor, is also a TFANA board member. Over the past several years, Will Eno worked with John on John's television adaptation of Susan Sheehan's Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *Is There No Place On Earth For Me?* In 2020, Will asked John some questions, via email, and here are John's responses.

**WILL ENO** Have you had a lot of run-ins with *Peer Gynt*, either performing it or seeing it?

**JOHN TURTURRO** I've always loved *Peer Gynt*, reading it, and I've seen some scenes from acting class performed but I've actually only seen it once, at the Yale School of Drama directed by Jan Eliasberg. And it was a very good production and my wife, who I didn't really know at the time but had a crush on, Katherine Borowitz, played all those different roles, including the Troll Queen and she did some outrageous things and of course that

made me even more interested in her and that's my encounter with it. But I've always liked reading it, and reading *Brand* too which is another poem.

**WILL ENO** Robert Bresson said that there is "nothing more inelegant and ineffective than an art conceived in another art's form," and that sometimes makes me think of *Peer Gynt*, which Ibsen originally wrote as a dramatic poem. Bresson also said "All husbands are ugly." And, it's hard to stop, "The sight of movement gives happiness: horse, athlete, bird." Do you feel like saying anything about any of these?

**JOHN TURTURRO** I agree, I think every movement reveals us and reveals us best if it's not commanded or willed. When you watch a great dancer, you don't notice the choreography, you feel like they're making it up in the moment. When you're making a film, when you're putting that in a film, it's

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those things which kind of provoke the gestures and the words. You can express great things with your hands, with your head, with your shoulders. I almost always feel that the movement is truer than words and that's something, especially when it's unconscious and revealing and somehow graceful. And I think silent movies really show that because those guys are sort of acrobats.

**WILL ENO** When did you first want to be an actor? Has there been a moment when you didn't want to be an actor?

**JOHN TURTURRO** I don't know if I can remember that exactly but it was watching movies on the Million Dollar Movie, which was the same movie five nights in a row, and maybe it was something with Edward G. Robinson or James Cagney, Bette Davis, Burt Lancaster. But I think the first time I saw someone look like me was when I saw highlights of *Midnight Cowboy*, clips from *Midnight Cowboy* with Dustin Hoffman and I was really shocked. I was like "Wow, here's a guy who

could be in our family!" So that was kind of a light bulb moment for me and then there were actors like Al Pacino, Robert DeNiro, and that kind of opened my mind to the possibility, even though I was always in love with certain films and film stars. But it was watching those old movies from the 30s, 40s and 50s and kind of living through James Cagney's death in *Angels With Dirty Faces*, sitting on the couch with my parents.

Moment when I didn't want to be an actor: maybe when I hit 50, I was at my doctor's office and I told him I wanted to go back to school and I wanted to study medicine. He talked me out of it, he said it was a long haul and he asked me some pertinent questions, like was I good at science? And I had to answer in the negative. So then he talked to me about what I do and that it's also useful and helpful to people and I said okay, so I resumed. But I think that's why I direct a little bit and write sometimes, to do the things that interest me and things I would like to see.

Will Eno. Photo by Maria Dizzia.



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**WILL ENO** Which is more complex, reality, or the representation of reality? Which is better?

**JOHN TURTURRO** I think reality is much more complex and I think in the long run, that's where everything comes from so I would say it's better. The only thing I like about the representation of reality is that it puts it into a form and it tells a story and sometimes it helps you formulate your own strategies in life, but I would vote for reality, even though I spend my life escaping reality—actually not, mining reality. I see myself more as a miner-slash-plumber.

**WILL ENO** Who is your favorite N.Y. Yankee?

**JOHN TURTURRO** My favorite NY Yankee, I would say growing up it was Thurman Munson and then Derek Jeter.

**WILL ENO** Realistic, I think, is one of those hall-of-mirror words that can be hard and even frustrating to define. *Realistic*: it isn't reality, but it's like it, although by definition "reality" is something that truly *is*, not an approximation of any kind. Saying a play is *realistic* seems as potentially troublesome as saying a statement is *true-like*. I've always liked the German word *unheimlich*, unhomelike, as it seems more interesting and expressive to define a thing as being "not like something we know very well," than to define it as being "like something that is difficult to define." I may be wandering away from a question here. So: are we happier, or somehow more comfortable, judging the "reality" of a piece of art than we are defining and even living in the actual reality that the piece of art is meant to imitate?

**JOHN TURTURRO** It's kind of a difficult question, Will. You're talking about reality and then a representation of reality and what's true-like. I think I'm not sure that the reality of a piece of art that we're defining makes me happier than living in the actual reality that the piece of art is meant to imitate. Maybe I err on trying to take my own life experience and put it into something that's constructive and maybe helpful or illuminating or evocative in some way that makes people feel less

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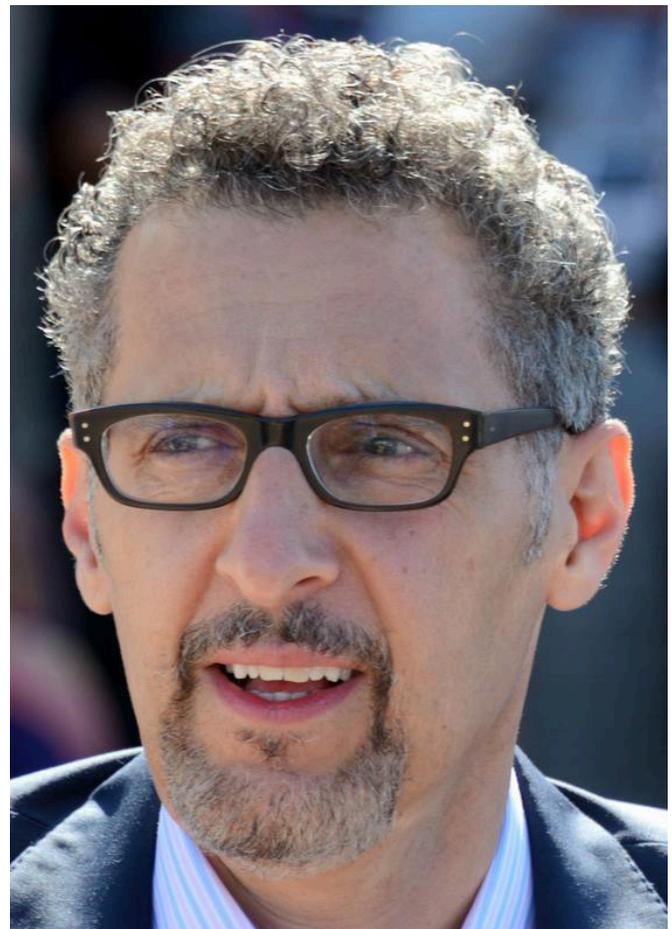
isolated and alone, and so therefore I feel like I'm doing something productive with it... but not at the expense of reality because you still have to live in reality and not run away from it. I think it's easier not to live in the actual reality, sometimes, depending on how challenging that is.

I like that German word too, *unheimlich*, it's not something we know very well and it's something that is difficult to define and I think there are people who are interested in that. I don't think that things are defined, that it's always helpful. I prefer pieces of art, if you want to call it that, to ask the questions and leave you provoked in a good way.

**WILL ENO** To stick with a problematic word for another moment: all artists are realists, but some of them are much slyer and better at it than others. Is that true?

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John Turturro at the 2015 Cannes Film Festival. Photo by Georges Biard. [CC BY-SA 3.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/).



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**JOHN TURTURRO** I'm not sure about that. Certainly, some are slyer and better but I'm not sure all are realists. But I will say yes, some are slyer and better and some are just truer. That's my very short answer.

**WILL ENO** Do you recognize the quote “you shall know the answer by the order of the questions”? I thought maybe it was a Talmudic scholar but I'm not finding anything. Regardless of who said it, and I don't think it was me, does it mean anything to you?

**JOHN TURTURRO** I think it's interesting, I need to muse on this for a while. Sounds like a pharaoh or somebody, I don't know—maybe you give the answer by the order of the questions and maybe you get your head handed to you. I'm a little frightened by this question, maybe that's just me.

**WILL ENO** Have you ever been to Ikea?

**JOHN TURTURRO** Once and that was more than enough.

**WILL ENO** Do you feel your Americanness to any greater degree when you're working in another country? Or maybe, to say that in other words, do you feel more yourself when you're away from home?

**JOHN TURTURRO** Yes, I feel my Americanness when I work in other countries. I also feel more relaxed when I work in certain countries like France or Italy, but yes. Sometimes in your approach organizationally, but not in other ways—sensitivity-wise or in relaxation or food or music, I don't feel my Americanness—but more in how things are organized, I feel that. I feel kind of both because I am both, I've always felt more Mid-Atlantic than American or Italian.

**WILL ENO** I have been thinking about “the self” as I've been working on and revising *Gnit*. It sometimes seems that, just in saying the word “self,” we suddenly take a half-step away from anything real and findable and alive. Almost in that way that you can't measure certain particles without altering them. I wonder if “finding the self” is a by-product of another project altogether, one that is much more engaged with other people and the world?

**JOHN TURTURRO** Yes, I think that finding the self is more of a byproduct of one that has more to do with other people and the world. I find people who are so isolated and always thinking about themselves, their sense of self is at the expense of another, and I find that, I have to say, somewhat exhausting and insufferable. I think the most interesting thing in life is what happens between people and I think you can find more about yourself that way too, although this can be tiring too if you're always aware of what's going on around you. Sometimes you do need time for reflection so I think you need a little of both but I don't walk around thinking about myself that much, I'm thinking about what I can do and hopefully taking in others around me and the world as much as possible without being overloaded.

**WILL ENO** Bonus unasked question—I forgot to ask John this:

In adapting *Peer Gynt*, I spent a lot of time and thought on the element/character of the *Button-moulder*, who appears late in the original and threatens to melt Peer's soul down in a common cauldron with other lackluster souls. The eternal repose of my soul is not something that I or a lot of people I know generally think a lot about. I even grew up with some religion but I still don't really have this as a living anxiety.

So this character has been replaced with a reporter, to whom Peter pitches some story ideas. My thought is that the modern version of Peer's anxiety might be that we wonder “Will I get an Obituary in the newspaper, or, just a little death notice? Will I be singled out, or just thrown into the common lot of birth, death, and wedding announcements?” Or a version of the idea behind the Jewish greeting of “May your name be inscribed in the Book of Life.” The question would have been some version of, “Do you think about your soul?” Or, “What do we mean when we use the word ‘soul?’”

Or, maybe, “Can the soul, if it exists, change?”

I am sure John would've had lively and illuminating answers or even better questions. ●