



Breaking in, Moving, But Not Feeling Welcomed

David Bizzaro is an award-winning professional puppeteer, actor and filmmaker who has taken an unconventional path toward breaking into the entertainment industry. While successful, he sometimes feels pigeonholed by an industry that frequently treats him as a stereotype. Stevon offers strategies for standing out by emphasizing rather than downplaying our full selves.

Stevon Lewis:

What's up, everybody? Welcome to *How to Talk to [High Achievers] about Anything*. I'm Stevon Lewis, a licensed psychotherapist. Today we welcome David Bazzaro, an Emmy award-winning puppeteer. He has an unconventional career and he's found success in it by following an unconventional path. Carving a space for himself hasn't always been easy, but for David, it's always felt necessary. Let's get into it.

David:

I am a puppeteer, actor, writer and filmmaker. I've been working in puppetry for about 10 years now, and I've been working in production and post-production since I was 16. I'm a Latino American. There's a lot of definitions and words for what we are and who we are because we're all still trying to figure out what our identity is, but that's what I'm going by right now and that's me.

My mother immigrated to the United States when she was 16 from El Salvador. She was fleeing the country because of the civil war that was going on at that time. I grew up very Americanized and my mom made a point to do that. She would tell me, "I'm not teaching you Spanish and we're not raising you like a Salvadoran kid because I want you to have all the opportunities that you can get as an American in this country.

What I've been told growing up is that I don't fit into being the typical quote unquote "White American" and I don't fit into what is perceived as the Latino. I really had a deep passion for acting as a child. And so my mom was trying to nourish that. And she's like, "I read in the newspaper that they're looking for Latino children in a commercial or just a kid in a commercial," and we'd go.

And I would be told things like, "Great, we love that you come for Latino actor, but you do know that this is for a Latino and you're white?" And it's like, "No, actually I'm not." And then I'd go out for a white role and they'd be like, "You're kind of ethnically ambiguous. Maybe go out for..." What'd they say? "Go out for Hawaiian roles or whatever." I wanted to just play parts.

I didn't want to be judged by the way I looked, I wanted to be judged by my ability. And that was very, that was in me at a really young age. When I was a kid, I never really thought of puppetry. When I was older, I was in between jobs and I was curious about puppetry because I'd been an animator for a while.

And so I was like, "Well, puppetry kind of is animation in a sense." But I didn't have a lot of money at the time and I made a rule for myself if I'm going to be pursuing a new craft or interest, I have to find someone to pay me to do it. And I saw this company making these interstitials with puppets, the little graphics you seen in between segments. And I'm like, "This is incredible." And I was like, "Well, I kind of know this guy. Why don't I message him on Facebook and say, 'Hey, you need commercials like this.'"

And I sent him the videos. And he wrote back pretty quickly, "Oh my God, this is brilliant. Could you do this?" And I lied and said, "Yes, a hundred percent I can do it." So I just started pursuing it. And I started a YouTube channel and started making videos. Not because nobody was like, well, nobody was really offering me work, but it was more so just to play and learn and figure things out.

But also a means to show people that I was serious about what I was doing. Whenever I get into any career, because of past experiences and because of growing up having a mother who's not from this country, I never knew how do I start into a career. There wasn't a path. It was like, "Okay, how do we become an actor? Let's look in the newspaper." I don't know.

And so my friend said to me as I was kind of making waves in the puppetry scene, he was like, "It's really weird. You're getting into this career in a way that no one else has done it." And I was like, "Well, what do you mean by that?"

And he said, "Well, everybody else is going up this ramp and they know their position on the ramp and they know what they got to do next. And it's like you walked up and saw the ramp and you're like, 'That's cool.' And then you built a ladder and put it up next to the ramp and then just walked up to the top of the ladder." It was just natural for me. If I saw an obstacle or if I saw something that I desired, I would try to find any method to learn that thing and just get really good at it and then convince somebody to try to hire me.

One of the things that is still a challenge for me is racial prejudice. Sometimes when I go on to set, some people will speak Spanish only to me because they know I'm Latino. And where sure, it might seem on the outside that's fine, but when you have someone who doesn't speak Spanish and they make it a choice to say like the three Spanish words they know to you every day and call you "señor" whenever they see you, it does other you in a big way. And it's still a challenge because when that happens, it opens up a wound that is still healing in me and it makes it hard for me to be present and to be completely a hundred percent focused at my job.

Stevon: Thank you for sharing your experience with us, David. David has a really interesting story. I've not ever met anyone who was a puppeteer. So when I listened to his story, it all makes sense to me. And I'll explain what that means. He talks about kind of being raised by immigrant parents, raising him to be, in his words, Americanized, called himself Latino American, jokes about all the different ways we can identify or he can identify himself or be identified.

And it really speaks to his experience growing up in America as a person of Latino descent. It's a thing of where he doesn't really fit in or doesn't feel like he fits in. And it's been, I want to say corroborated, right? It's been supported by his experiences in different spaces. So when he's around other folks of Latino descent, he's not Latino enough. And then when he's around white folks, he's also not really white enough.

In David's story some of the dynamics, and I'll say yes, they are familiar to me, especially for high achievers of color. Him wanting to be seen for his abilities and not seen for his appearance. So not wanting to be recognized or have the fact that he is El Salvadorian, that he is male, and he doesn't want those things to be the reason why he does get something or doesn't get something. And that's really difficult to do.

And so when we think about how does one kind of find a pass around that, it's going to sound odd what I suggest that they do. We, in the field of psychotherapy, we call it paradoxical interventions, which really means that we're going to have you do something that seems like it would be out of step of what you would expect would be the response or the way to handle a situation.

For people who are in spaces where they're being seen not for the thing that they want to or being recognized for, or you're being seen for things that you don't want to be known for or noticed for, or kind of to take precedent in your life, lean into that and own it more. The tendency is to want to kind of downplay it or hide it or run away from it. And I'm saying, accept it. Do more of it. Be more yourself.

If you aren't being accepted or made to feel kind of comfortable in the spaces you inhabit, there's a freedom there. There's a freedom for you to be you because you don't lose anything. Because it's, you're not made to feel comfortable already. I don't have to try to hide bits of myself because they see it already. So then why not just be more of yourself?

The part that really stood out to me in David's story is the, he didn't, kind of alluded to it, but didn't explicitly say, it's the part about leaning into himself. Here's how David put it.

David: My friend said to me as I was kind of making waves in the puppetry scene, he was like, "It's really weird. You're getting into this career in a way that no one else has done it." And I was like, "Well, what do you mean by that?" And he said, "Well, everybody else is going up this ramp and they know their position on the ramp and they know what they got to do next. And it's like you walked up and saw the ramp and you're like, 'That's cool.' And then you built a ladder and put it up next to the ramp and then just walked up to the top of the ladder."

Stevon: The ability to find an alternative kind of route to success is one of the things that David has been able to do throughout his life. I think the response that you get or that individuals have, high achievers is one in which they are kind of questioning their own deservedness because they didn't take the quote unquote "Traditional method."

I love it though, because it's saying there are multiple ways to kind of find success. So let's not just be beholden to the one that's already been established. For a variety of reasons, you might need to find innovative ways to get there for you that others might not be able to follow, but you can because of the skills and your uniqueness. And so I love that about the way he did it in describing it as a ladder.

But it's often you have to be creative when you're a high achiever. And when you're a high achiever of color, some of the opportunities aren't afforded to you, you aren't presented with the same avenues or access to supports higher up. And so you still got to find a way to be successful without that.

David's story is a testament to saying, "Hey, I can be successful and I can do that on my own and in my own way, and it's going to be creative. And people might not be able to follow it, but it works really, really well for me." For some high achievers that might find it difficult to do that, often when I'm working with them, what I find or what comes to be brought to our awareness is the idea that it's more of their thinking than their ability that's preventing them from being able to find those alternative routes that aren't as traditional.

And so their thinking is that they have to do it the way it's been done, and they don't kind of ask the questions of like, "Well, what would I do if I could just go and do it?" I have some people that I work with who are really successful and they don't have college degrees. And what they do then is continue to beat themselves up about not having college degree. Like, "Oh, I'm not like everybody else." And it's like, yeah, but you also didn't need to be.

You're in the room with everybody else that has a college degree, you didn't need one. That's really amazing. And kind of getting them to recognize that the way you found yourself into the room and the way you're able to stay in there is your work around and have it. For someone who's wanting to engage in a space that maybe they haven't previously been in or maybe don't feel like they have the proper training for, the best advice I could give is to ask questions.

What I found of people who are really successful and intelligent is that they ask a ton of questions. And I think sometimes we feel like if we ask too many questions, then it shows us to not be as smart or not be as equipped or well qualified to kind of be in a space or to do a thing. But what it really shows is that you are curious enough about this space to kind of want to understand it in all its kind of complexity.

And I think the more you ask questions, then the more you're able to understand and see how you naturally and authentically can fit in and can benefit from being in there. And so avenues or opportunities will present themselves as you ask more questions about other people's histories and what roads they took. And you can take some of that information and apply it to yourself. Ask those questions of people that you have determined are successful in a space that you've determined you want to be a part of.

And that doesn't mean you go to the highest person, right? Like, "Oh, I want to be in entertainment, so but I don't have access to Oprah." Okay. Yeah. Most people don't. So also do you know anybody that works in entertainment in any capacity. And so you can start to ask questions of people at any level because they're at a level that you're not at at that moment anyway. Bit of advice where if I can leave our listeners with anything, it would be to encourage them to run your own race because you have nothing else to lose.

And that's a wrap. Thank you so much for listening to How to Talk to [High Achievers] about Anything. We have really big plans for our show and we want you to be a part of it. We want to hear about your successes and challenges, your sacrifices, the ways you've celebrated, and what's ahead as you grow. Send our producer Virginia an email and we'll get your story on the show.

She's at Virginia@lwcstudios.com. How to Talk to [High Achievers] about Anything is an original production of LWC Studios. Our show is produced by Virginia Lora. Editing and production support from Jordan Cali. This episode was mixed by Trent Lightburn. Juleyka Lantigua is the creator and executive producer. I'm Stevon Lewis. On Twitter and Instagram, we're at Talk To Achievers. Bye, everybody.

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ERASING THE MARGINS