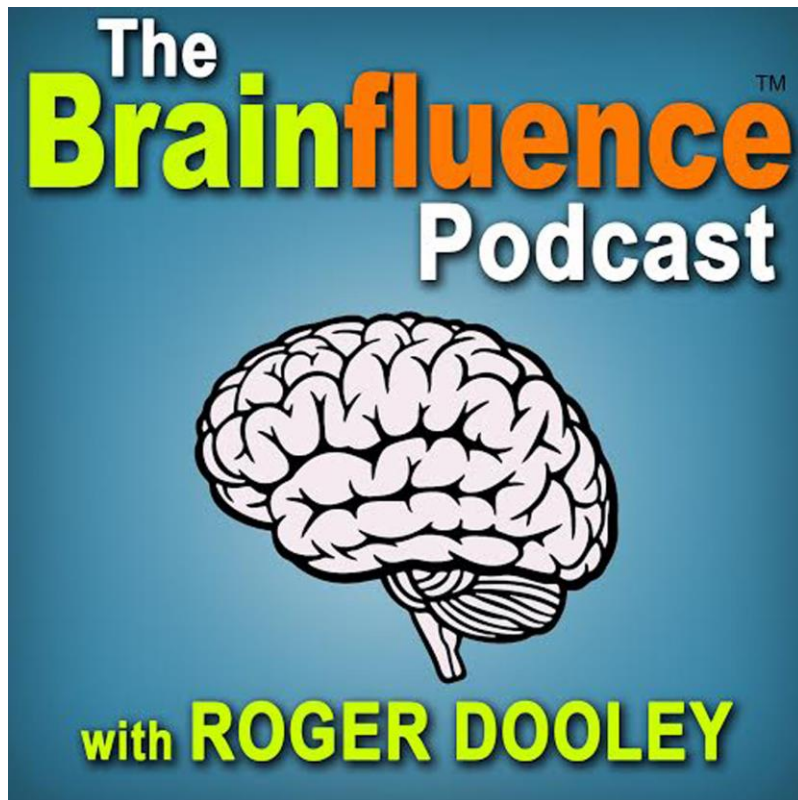


Ep #73: How to Steal the Show with Michael Port



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**Roger Dooley**

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## Ep #73: How to Steal the Show with Michael Port

Welcome to the Brainfluence Podcast with Roger Dooley, author, speaker and educator on neuromarketing and the psychology of persuasion. Every week, we talk with thought leaders that will help you improve your influence with factual evidence and concrete research. Introducing your host, Roger Dooley.

Roger Dooley: Welcome to the Brainfluence Podcast. I'm Roger Dooley. My guest this week has a unique background. He's written multiple bestselling business books, something that he has in common with quite a few of our past guests, but he also has had a successful acting career. He has a master's degree from NYU's Graduate Acting Program and has had roles in films like *The Pelican Brief* and on television shows like *Sex and the City* and *Law and Order*. My guest's New York Times' bestsellers have included *Book Yourself Solid* and *The Think Big Manifesto*. He's an expert in public speaking. His newest book will be out soon. It's titled, appropriately enough, *Steal the Show: From Speeches to Job Interviews to Deal-Closing Pitches, How to Guarantee a Standing Ovation for All the Performances in Your Life*. Welcome to the show, Michael Port.

Michael Port: Thank you so much. Great to be here.

Roger Dooley: Now I'm really excited to have you on, Michael. I'm a speaker, and I'm hoping to learn from you along with our listeners. Let me start by pointing out the obvious, I guess. It seems like a professional acting background is perfect for public speaking, but it seems a bit intimidating to the rest of us who have business backgrounds or engineering backgrounds, or other kinds of backgrounds. I imagine that Russell Crow or Meryl Streep could give an amazing speech on just about any topic that can make the audience laugh or cry or cheer, but most of us just

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don't have those kinds of skills. I know you work with a lot of different kinds of people. Can regular business people excel at speaking and doing pitches?

Michael Port: Of course, I imagine the audience is going to assume my answer will be yes, or else I wouldn't be doing this kind of work because I believe so much on the individual, and each person has the opportunity to be fully self-expressed. I think that if we embrace that idea that we can be fully self-expressed in our own unique and individual way then we can be a performer. You don't have to be an entertainer to be a performer. I didn't write *Steal the Show* for performers per se; I wrote it for people who want to excel during high stakes situations because the quality of our life is often determined by how well we perform during those every day high stake situations. Again, you don't have to be an entertainer to be a performer. One of the reasons that people have a hard ... Listen, there are two reasons that sometimes people have a hard time with public speaking or are scared of it, and I really, really get it. One of them is that they're not prepared. Performing in front of others takes rehearsal. It takes time from crafting a material to putting it up on its feet and rehearsing that material and then getting ready to actually perform it.

Very rarely does the average person give much time to the performance part of a presentation. They may work on the material, they may write out a speech, or they may organize the pitch that they're going to go through, but rarely do they spend a lot of time rehearsing it. One of the easiest ways to reduce anxiety is to know what you're doing when you walk out there to give a speech. That's number one. I'd devote an entire chapter, very, very long, comprehensive chapter to a seven-step rehearsal

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process, so that we, all of us, learn how to rehearse, because it's not something that we've been taught unless we are professional performers. That's number one. Number two, I think sometimes when we are going to give a speech, we spend so much time obsessing about what could go wrong that we focus on trying to get approval rather than focusing on getting results by being helpful. Rarely will I give a flawless performance, rarely will I give a flawless interview. When I say rarely, I mean never.

Roger Dooley: A little degrading at the end of this, Michael.

Michael Port: Yeah. I say never. This idea of being perfect is an impossibility when it comes to any kind of art form when there's any creativity involved whatsoever. It's very, very difficult. When we obsess on being good or being perfect or doing it the right way, our focus is now internalized rather than externalized. As a performer, our job is to perform for the people in the room. As a speaker, it's to deliver on a promise to that audience. I had a colleague of mine who called me up frantically because she was to appear on one of the big network morning programs for her new book. She was so excited, but she was very, very nervous. She said, "Michael, what can I do to be good? Please just what should I do?" I said, "You cannot be good," and there's a big pause. I said, "No, no. I don't mean you're not good. I mean you can't go into a performance attempting to be good. All you can do is get really, really clear on your intentions, the reason that you're there, the promise that you are there to deliver, and then just do everything in your power to be as helpful as you possibly can." If you do that then you may be perceived as good, but rarely will everyone like you. That's a rarity, too, even the most well-known actors.

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Even Meryl Streep is not universally loved by every single person.

If we are focusing on approval rather than results then the voices in our head, the voices of judgment, the internal critics get louder and louder and louder because we are afraid of the external critics. Until we are able to silence the internal critics, those external critics will stay very loud. In part one of the book, I focused specifically on silencing the critics and crushing your fears because this anxiety that we have about performance is really just about being rejected, it's just about needing approval or wanting approval, being afraid that we're not going to get it because we don't know how to actually perform.

Roger Dooley: It's good to know that there is hope for the rest of us who don't have professional acting backgrounds. I think that's really ... I did expect you to answer me affirmative to that. You wouldn't have put it in the book otherwise. It's good to have that background, too. I want to get into more of your strategies and the meat of your book, but I'm curious. I did my undergrad work at Carnegie Mellon and hang out with some of the drama students there. They were really talented people. One in particular, I can't even remember his whole name now. He might easily have turned into Robin Williams. He just had this incredible range of things he could do with voices and accents and body language and just create a totally new personality right in front of you, but none of these folks really seemed, in retrospect, to be the kind that would have successful careers writing business books. How did you happen to make that leap?

Michael Port: Sure. My personality just didn't fit very well with the day-to-day activities that an actor goes through, auditioning all

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day long, waiting for other people to give you work. It just didn't fit my personality, and I wanted work now. I wanted it fast. I was in shows like *Sex and the City* and *Third Watch* and *All My Children*, I was in *Law and Order* and I did films like *The Pelican Brief*, *Down to Earth*, *The Believer*, and I did a lot of voice-overs. That was my bread and butter for companies like AT&T and Braun, Coors Beer, Budweiser, Pizza Hut. I just didn't like the lifestyle. I suppose if I was working like Tom Cruise was working, I would have liked the lifestyle a lot better, but I wasn't mature enough at that time to wait. I just didn't want to wait. I thought, "If I go into business, if I go get a job, I can work my way up. My work ethic will help me get where I want to go."

For those people who have read Seth Godin's book, *The Dip*, they'll understand that if you can see what the dip looks like then you can figure out how to get through the dip and, once you get through the dip, you're good to go. In the world of acting, the dip is cavernous. You just do not know. It's always a waiting game and so much of it is just being in the right time at the right place for the right role and then you're off and running. I couldn't handle that at that time.

Roger Dooley: There's a lot of research that shows the career satisfaction relates in part to the degree that you have control over things. It seems like that profession ... Unless you are Tom Cruise. That's like saying, "Gee. I wish I could be-

Michael Port: President?

Roger Dooley: Yeah, president. Actually, president probably has a severe lack of control, too, over outcomes anyway.

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Michael Port: Yeah, sure.

Roger Dooley: I want to be Malcolm Gladwell or Stephen King, as a writer. That's great. Those guys can go into a publisher and be in control, but the other 99% or 99.99% don't. I'm sure that acting is exactly that way. Sure, there are a few actors who can name their terms and choose their projects and so on, but for everyone else, they're at the mercy of a lot of people.

Michael Port: That's exactly right. You have to have a certain personality to be able to deal with that. At that time, I didn't. I went into the fitness industry on the business side, and I spent about six years there. Once again, I moved up the ladder and I was doing pretty well, but I didn't have a lot of control because there was a ceiling, and I really couldn't go higher than that ceiling inside that organization. I always had to ask for permission to do the things that I thought would be really, really good for the company. I often had to fly under the radar to get things done because I was working outside the box. Again, it just wasn't for me, so I started my own consultancy. Ever since then, that's about 13 years ago, like has been quite lovely from a professional perspective because, as you said, I have choices now. I work when I want and I work on the projects I want and I work with the people I want, and I am really lucky that I get to do that. That's for sure.

Roger Dooley: Definitely. Michael, one thing that you surprised me with right out of the gate in your book was in the first chapter. Now I totally get the idea that acting skills are great for speakers. I feel that's, in large part, due to the actor's ability to create an appropriate persona, not to mention having some of the technical skills in terms of vocal delivery and so on, but your first point was that you

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should find your voice, which turns things on their head or me because I felt that, gee, many of speakers might be looking for a better voice or perhaps, in some cases, just to be a different voice. What do you mean by finding your voice? Why is that important?

Michael Port: You don't have to be different to make a difference. So many folks have had drilled into them this idea that they need to be different to get ahead, that they have to do things differently, they have to be different. What I have seen happen time and time again is a focus on trying to be different than others or trying to be different than yourself in some way because you think somehow that you're not enough, you're not good enough, you don't know enough, you don't have enough. This is, I think, the killer of any personal or professional dream. What we do is we wrap ourselves up in these fat layers of persona and we think that they're armor, that they're going to shield us from rejection, that they're going to protect us from the elements, so to speak. Really what they do is they just play a small ... They make our voice smaller, quieter, and less significant because it's constrained.

Finding your voice is often not necessarily achieved by looking for it outside yourself, but by uncovering it in yourself already and letting go of the ideas that you may have about yourself that are either getting in your way or the personality traits that you've adopted over the years to protect you, or because you think that they are appealing to other people, because when you are performing in any way, whether you're in a sales meeting, job interview, negotiation, or speaking in front of an audience, you're there to share. You're there to share your story and, hopefully, that story is applicable to the people in the room. If it's not, then that's not the room you're supposed



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to be in. If it is then you'll be very compelling to those folks, because I think there are certain people you're meant to serve and there's the others that you're not. Your job is to do everything in your power to reach the people that you're meant to serve. What do you stand for is one big question. What do you stand for? Are you willing to share that with other people regardless of the consequences? Are you willing to make change in your life regardless of the consequences?

When I say regardless of the consequences, I don't mean cashing in your whole 401k and running off to Belize or something and leaving your family in the lurch without dinner on the table. I'm not talking about that, but maybe some of the people in your life need to change. Maybe the work you're doing needs to change. As we get older, we get more and more fixed in the way that we behave. We end up silencing ourselves because we think we have to stay on one particular path. The most successful people, most extraordinary people, tend to be able to play the right role in any situation, so that they examine their prejudices about performing, they scrape away this false persona, and then they amplify the most compelling parts of their personality to the given situation at hand. They allow themselves to be comfortable with discomfort. This is very, very important. They allow themselves to be comfortable with discomfort. Never apologize for your voice. There was a study in 2010 in the Journal of Psychological Science. They found that women apologize more than men. Now men were just as willing to apologize as women, but they felt they had a higher threshold, meaning that there was a higher threshold that need to be reached before they were willing to apologize.

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If you find yourself apologizing a lot for your view or your opinion, or if you're in a meeting and you say, "Listen, I don't know if this is going to be the thing you're looking for, but ... ," and then share it, as opposed to, "Yes, and I have another idea." In the second part of the book, I outline, as you know, a six performance principles that all great performers adhere to. One of them is the principle of "yes, and ... " It is the foundation of all improv comedy. I'm not teaching improv comedy to the readers of the book.

Roger Dooley: That was a good segue, Michael. That was my next question.

Michael Port: Oh, that's great. Outstanding. Yeah. I'm not teaching improv comedy to the readers; although I do have a whole section on humor, and even joke writing for the regular person. Improv is a part of everyday life. You can either be the devil's advocate, the person who is always poking holes and finding reasons things don't work, or you could be the person that says, "Yes, and how about this," because when you are the person that builds on what other people are trying to build then you are more relevant to the people in the room.

Roger Dooley: There's actually some neuroscience underlying with the "yes, and ... " strategy, isn't there?

Michael Port: There sure is. We tend to move away from negative experiences and we move towards positive experiences. That seems very obvious, but you actually can change the make-up of your brain without getting into the neuroscience of it all. You can change the make-up of your brain by taking that very imaginative approach to the work that you're doing by saying, "Yes, and how about this," "Yes, and how about that," "Yes, and how about

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this," because if you are not saying yes, you are shutting down opportunities all around you. This is different. There's always a caveat because someone could say, "Yeah, but I know that if I say yes to all the requests that I get, I'll never be able to get anything done." I'm not talking about that. We need to be very discerning when it comes to which projects we take on and which we don't, who we spend our time with and who we don't, but that's very different than a modus operandi that is a negative, that offers a closed door approach rather than a very open door approach from an imagination perspective. See, I have little interest in critics because anyone can tear something down. The trick is building something better in its place.

Roger Dooley: Michael, let me address something that probably many of our listeners who do presentations or speeches or various other kinds of even small meeting presentations, it's one thing to be a motivational or inspirational speaker, and we all admire those. I've heard Lou Holtz, or have seen Lou Holtz speak a few times, and there's a guy that's never got invited to do a Shakespeare play, but, amazingly, can hold an audience for an hour with no problem at all. Probably most of us who speak are really there to deliver some kind of content and knowledge. I go to a lot of conferences and there may be a few big keynotes, but then there are maybe 150 other speakers in different tracks who are all there to convey knowledge and all presumably want to do a good job for their audience, even the keynotes at many of these. If the speech is too content-free, if it's all touchy-feely and anecdotes and you really feel good at the end of it, but there's nothing there, even they're critiqued for that. At the same time, when you're there to deliver content, there's attention between that and building up an emotional bond with the audience.

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How would you suggest folks that are trying to communicate some knowledge or some techniques and so on to their audience, but, at the same time, be engaging, and maybe even get that standing ovation?

Michael Port: Sure. There are message speeches and there are curriculum-based speeches from a technical perspective. The way that you organize those speeches is different. In *Steal the Show*, I offer a number of different frameworks that the reader can use to organize their information because the more organized your information is, the more likely you'll be perceived to be an expert. That's an important part of presentation is the organization of your information so that the audience can consume it, because often when we are working on curriculum-based speeches especially, we focus so heavily on the information that, a, we over-pack the speech and offer too much information that can then overwhelm the audience; and, b, we don't focus on the consumption part of the presentation because you can give a lot of information, but if people can't consume it then you may not have achieved your goal. What we're doing very often is looking at what techniques you can use to help people consume the information that you're sharing. I outline a number of audience interaction strategies that help you do that. That's one part of the equation. The other thing to consider is the message in the curriculum-based speech. What is the big idea? Because a great curriculum-based speech is driven by a big idea.

I want everyone to write these things down. Number one, the big idea. The big idea, again, doesn't have to be different to make a difference. This is really important. It doesn't have to be different to make it different. I do a keynote called *The Think Big Revolution*. It really feels

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like a one-person show. Quite fun and it's very experiential. If you want to watch it, you can go to michaelport.com and scroll down. You'll see it down there on the page. The big idea is based around thinking big. Now Donald Trump also has built his brand around thinking big, but Donald and I are quite different. It's not just that I don't have hair and he has hair; there are many, many differences between Donald and myself. I don't have to come up with some idea that nobody else has ever come up with, this idea of thinking big, in order to make a difference. That's number one, is the big idea. Number two is the promise. What promise are you making to the audience? The promise is based on the big idea. The big idea is the through line. The big idea is the through line that helps you deliver on that promise. If you adopt this big idea, if you engage in this, if you take it on as your own then you'll likely achieve this promise. That's number two.

Number three: what does the world look like for the people in the room right now? Because if they know that we know the way the world looks to us, they're more likely to adopt our big idea. They may want that promise, but if they don't think we're similar to them, or at least we understand them, then they may not be willing to go after that promise with you. Number four: what are the consequences of not adopting this big idea and going after this promise? Because even if the rewards, which is number 5, are great, without really recognizing the consequences of not adopting this big idea, they may not be as likely to go after those rewards, because rewards often seem distant, far off in the future. It's like investing. I don't know how many of your listeners focus on investing, but retirement is something that many people don't plan for because the rewards.

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Roger Dooley: Probably 100% are going to be that at some point, sooner or later.

Michael Port: Yeah, exactly right. I think something like 50% of people don't have retirement funds. It's in part because they can't imagine the rewards of having a retirement fund because they're focusing on the rewards that they get now. This idea of something out in the future that's really great is hard to pursue, but if you really understand the consequences, you may be more likely to go after it and then get excited about the rewards as a result. Those five elements need to be in place. Then what you're doing is you're taking this curriculum-based speech and you're really driving a message home through it. As a result, you can make much more emotional connection to an audience. In the book, as you know, I outline the three different types of contrast that each speech should exploit. One of them is emotional contrast because you're trying to take the audience on an emotional roller coaster ride. You want them to have fun and then think critically. Then you want them to be really, really touched by something, and then maybe a little bit scared of something. You're moving them back and forth and back and forth in this extraordinary roller coaster experience, like watching a great film.

You can do that without being an actor. You're not performing characters up there, you're not up there going, "Hey, how are you doing, man? I see you've got a hot seat." You're not pretending to be somebody else; you are standing in the service of others as you stand in the service of your own destiny, because you are willing to take the time to do everything in your power to serve them. Contrast emotionally is very, very important. There's delivery contrast. It's the different ways that you

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deliver this curriculum. Sometimes it's through video, sometimes you're out in the audience, sometimes you're on the stage, sometimes you're lying down, sometimes you're doing an exercise with people. There's lots of different ways to deliver the content. You can even have audience members help you create content in the moment. That's the type of delivery of content. There's emotional contrast, there's delivery contrast, and then there's, of course, content contrast, structural contrast.

You're moving in and out of the different frameworks that I offer in Steal the Show from the problem-solution framework to the numerical to the chronological to the modular to the compare and contrast, and you've got people going, "Wow! That's really interesting," "Ooh, that's another way to look at it," "Oh, wow! I love how you organized this." As a result, you get a very, very, very connected speech and you've now taken a curriculum-driven speech and you've turned it into more of an experience that people feel that they were a part of. As a result, they look at you as a performer and an educator.

Roger Dooley: That's great. That would probably apply equally well to longer form presentations like seminars, workshops, and so on.

Michael Port: Yeah, absolutely. The same is true.

Roger Dooley: Even more important to have that variety and different techniques and so on in there.

Michael Port: One of the things I also focus on is expanding and contracting content and presentations to the time allotted. What you're trying to do is you're trying to design your presentations so that they can fit either in 20 minutes or an hour or a half day or a full day, depending on what's

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appropriate. You're expanding and contracting it as is appropriate to the amount of time you have to the space that you're in to the given circumstances rather than trying to create something new every time you're out there trying to make a difference.

Roger Dooley: Very good. Just to change gears here a little bit, Michael. I noticed on one of your websites, you comment that you've only fallen off the stage into the orchestra once. Did that really happen?

Michael Port: It really happened, yeah. I fell off the stage. I was right at the edge of the stage. I lost my perspective a little bit and I thought I could keep myself there. I just slipped and I fell into the orchestra pit. You heard a big bang. I did what my son does when he falls down in another room and you hear a big noise. He knows that I'm going to be worried something happened, so he goes, "I'm okay." That's exactly what I did. I got a great laugh. I had to run all the way back around because there weren't these steps to get up on the stage. Then that was the best moment of the whole experience.

Roger Dooley: It's probably made it very memorable.

Michael Port: It did.

Roger Dooley: But something you want to use judiciously.

Michael Port: Indeed. I was very fortunate that I did not hurt myself. Now, with a few more years on me, I might not have been quite so sprightly and jumped up quite so quickly.

Roger Dooley: We're getting close to being out of time here, Michael, but is there one big mistake that you see even high level speakers make? I'm sure you've seen a lot of bad



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speeches, but is there something that even folks who you would expect to be quite good and are, in general, quite good, that those speakers still make?

Michael Port: Indeed. There's actually a laundry list of mistakes that we make. I'm guilty of continuing to make mistakes myself. One of the mistakes that you see continuously, even from professional speakers, is wandering. Very rarely does a speaker consider how they're going to use the stage, how they're going to move on the stage. They spend a lot of time on the content, trying to figure out, "What am I going to say?" but very little time on the blocking of that content. Blocking is a term that comes from 19th Century theater, when the directors were figuring out where to place the actors on the stage, where to move them on the stage. They would use these little blocks on a miniature set. They called it blocking. I challenge anyone who's listening to think when they give a speech, how much time they spent on thinking about where they were going to move. When I see professional speakers ... And I work with people who have never given a speech before, but have a high stakes situation coming up, we work with the A-listers, the top level speakers in the world, professional speakers.

I find this is consistent across the board, this wandering that you see, the pacing back and forth, the looking down each time they were going to think of what to say next, which disconnects them from the audience. This is a key, to look at the movement. Of course, in *Steal the Show*, I address this extensively, of how to block out a presentation. I even give you pages of my script, so you see the blocking rotations and you understand how you create this kind of movement when you are preparing for a presentation, and then how to adjust it during a

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presentation depending on the space that you're in. Very, very important.

Roger Dooley: Great. Let me ask one final question here, Michael. Since you have an acting background and presumably have consumed a fair amount of media in your own time, are there any great movie speeches that you find either inspiring or just great examples of how to deliver a speech?

Michael Port: One of the greatest speeches written is Henry V speech in Shakespeare's Henry V, one of the greatest speeches written. I think that Kenneth Branagh does a wonderful job in the film version of Henry V. I recommend that people see that. It's really quite wonderful. Then, of course, there's King's Speech, which is about the King...

Roger Dooley: It's about speaking.

Michael Port: Having to give a speech. He was not comfortable with it, and he stuttered. He eventually overcame this and gave a great speech. That's another great speech opportunity. You watch these speeches, and we could talk about storytelling for hours. If you have a couple of minutes, I'm happy to talk about how to tell stories to teach this structure behind storytelling, but if you watch speeches, you can see in films and on the stage, you can see the same structure in virtually all of these stories. Writers, they know how to sculpt the story. Comedians, they know how to sculpt the story using this particular structure; whereas most of us don't. We've never been exposed to it as a storytelling tool. We just tell the story the way that we experienced it. Often there's lots of wandering and rambling.

Roger Dooley: Is there a universal structure?

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Michael Port: Yes, Aristotle's Three-Act Structure. The idea is there are three acts in any story. The first act is the given circumstances. It's the time, it's the place, it's the setting. It's the exposition is what it's called in the theater. It's the information that we need in order to understand what's about to happen. If you have way too much exposition then the audience gets a little bored and says, "Come on. Get on with it already." If you don't have enough exposition then they're confused. It's like watching a French film, like they're, "What? Who's the brother of ... I'm sorry. What? What's going on?" You don't want them to be in that position either. You want just enough information that will get them ready for the conflict. That's act two. Act two is the conflict. It's the inciting incident. What happens that changes the world for these people in this story?

Then there's some action that occurs after this inciting incident. Then there's more conflict that occurs and so more action that occurs and more conflict and more action. That is usually 85% of the story because that's what's exciting to watch. Exposition is not exciting to watch necessarily; it's often informational in a sense. Then this conflict is what really is exciting to watch. Then the third act is the resolution. What happens at the end? Does everybody live happily ever? Does everybody die? Is the world destroyed? If it's a joke, what's the punch line? The longer the story, the more payoff there needs to be at the end.

Roger Dooley: Very good. Michael, let me remind our audience that we are speaking with Michael Port, bestselling author of *Book Yourself Solid* and the upcoming book, *Steal the Show: From Speeches to Job Interviews to Deal-Closing Pitches, How to Guarantee a Standing Ovation for All the*

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Performances in Your Life. Michael, where can people find you and your stuff online?

Michael Port: Stealtheshow.com is a great place to go because when I launch a new book, we give away the farm. We give away documentaries to masterclass documentaries, online immersion courses, tickets to live events around the country on public speaking and performance, and much, much more. If you go to stealtheshow.com, you can see, you pick up one book, you get a whole bunch of great bonuses. You pick up a couple more books, you get even more bonuses. That's a great place to go. Stealtheshow.com. Of course, if you are listening right now and you just happen to be in Barnes and Noble or any other bookstore, I'm sure they'll have a copy and be very willing to sell it to you.

Roger Dooley: Great. Mention michaelport.com, too. We'll have links to all of these on the show notes page, which will be at rogerdooley.com/podcast. Michael, thanks so much for being on the show. It's been a lot of fun.

Michael Port: Oh, good. It's my pleasure. Thank you so much for having me.

Thank you for joining me for this episode of the Brainfluence Podcast. To continue the discussion and to find your own path to brainy success, please visit us at [RogerDooley.com](http://RogerDooley.com).