

Begin here:

~~ing~~ The actor is given a cue, and he shuffles his feet and blows out air in a huff, much like a whale, sometimes enunciating a sort of “phew,” and then continues to the assigned line. What does this mean? It means the actor was moved by an unforeseen sensation, emotion, or perception, and, in an effort to regain what he understood to be a necessary anchor of self-consciousness, he played for time. All of this happened, of course, in the merest fraction of a second, but it did happen.

And it happens all the time, that huff, that “I mean.” That’s where the scene went. If the actor had simply opened his mouth on cue and spoken *even though* he felt uncertain, the audience would have been treated to the truth of the moment, to a lovely, unexpected, unforeseeable beautiful exchange between the two people onstage. They would in effect have witnessed the true lost art of the actor.

Stanislavsky said that the person one is is a thousand times more interesting than the best actor one could become. And when the actor picks up her cue, then speaks out though uncertain, the audience *sees* that interesting person. They see true courage, not a portrayal of courage, but true courage. The individual onstage speaks because she is called upon to speak—when she has nothing to support her except her self-respect.

When the actual courage of the actor is coupled with the lines of the playwright, the illusion of character is created. When the audience sees the steadfastness

of the actress playing Joan coupled with the words of Shaw, they see majesty. When they see the courage of the actor playing Willy Loman coupled with the words of Arthur Miller, they see anguish. And it is the coupling of the truth of the actor struggling bravely with uncertainty, with the portrayal made by the dramatist, which, again, creates the illusion of character—the illusion of the character of the king, the murderer, or the saint.

The Method got it wrong. Yes, the actor is undergoing something onstage, but it is beside the point to have him or her “undergo” the supposed trials of the character upon the stage. The actor has his own trials to undergo, and they are right in front of him. They don’t have to be superadded; they exist. His challenge is not to recapitulate, to *pretend* to the difficulties of the written character; it is to open the mouth, stand straight, and say the words bravely—adding nothing, denying nothing, and without the intent to manipulate anyone: himself, his fellows, the audience.

To learn to do that is to learn to act.

The actor, in learning to be true and simple, in learning to speak to the point despite being frightened, and with no certainty of being understood, creates his *own* character; he forges character in himself. Onstage. And it is this character which he brings to the audience, and by which the audience is truly moved.

~~to defeat the woolly mammoth and to vote for supply-side economics—we are infinitely suggestible.~~

Begin: As much as we theatre folk like to think of ourselves as intellectuals, we are not. Ours is not an intellectual profession. All the book learning in the world, all the “ideas,” will not enable one to play Hedda Gabler, and all the gab about the “arc of the character” and “I based my performance on . . .” is gibberish. There is no arc of the character; and one can no more base a performance on an idea than one can base a love affair on an idea. These phrases are nothing but talismans of the actor to enable him or her to ward off evil, and the evil they attempt to ward off is the terrifying unforeseen.

The magic phrases and procedures are incantations to lessen the terror of going out there naked. But that’s how the actor goes out there, like it or not.

And all the emotions and sense memory and emotional checkpoints will not create certainty. On the contrary, they will only dull the actor to the one certainty onstage, which is that the moment is going to unfold as it will and in spite of the actor’s desires. The actor cannot control it; he or she can only ignore it.

To return to suggestibility. The script is going to live in its own unforeseeable ways. The other people onstage will be acting in this rehearsal, in this performance, in this moment, in this take, in their own unforeseeable ways. Therefore you the actor, as you will be dealing with both the script and the others, as you are *seeing* something you did not expect, will likely be

feeling something you did not expect. You will be brought to feel, as I said, "I cannot play that scene in *Hamlet* because I am unsure; I thought I understood it and now I just don't know. Also, the other actors seem to want something from me I am not in the position to deliver"—which is, of course, the same situation in which the audience discovers Hamlet—what a coincidence.

How can the actor know that that which he or she is feeling in the moment is not only acceptable but an eloquent and beautiful part of the play? The actor cannot. When onstage it's not only unnecessary but impossible to attribute one's feelings, to say, "I feel A because I am overtired, and I feel B because the 'character' should feel it, and I feel C because the fellow playing the king opposite me is a ham," and so on.

Actors like to attribute their feelings, as this gives them the illusion of control over them. Everything they try to wish away is the unexpected; which is to say again, the *play*.

The question is, how can an actor know or remember that? And the answer is, the actor can't. Time onstage moves too quickly; and the moment, if one has time to consider it, is long gone by the time the consideration begins.

So wisdom consists in this: do not attribute feelings, act on them before attributing them, before negotiating with them, before saying, "This is engendered by the play, this is not engendered by the play." Act on them.

First, although you won't believe it, they're *all* engendered by the play; and second, even if they were not, by the time you feel something, the audience has already seen it. It happened and you might as well have acted on it. (If you didn't, the audience saw not "nothing," but you, the actor, denying something.)

The above is true and it's difficult to do. It calls on the actor not to do more, not to believe more, not to work harder as part of an industrial effort, but to *act*, to speak out bravely although unprepared and frightened.

The middle-class work ethic: "But I did my preparation. It is not my fault if the truth of the moment does not conform." That ethic is not going to avail. Nobody cares how hard you worked. Nor should they.

Acting, which takes place for an audience, is not as the academic model would have us believe. It is not a test. It is an art, and it requires not tidiness, not paint-by-numbers intellectuality, but immediacy and courage.

We are of course trained in our culture to hold our tongue and control our emotions and to behave in a reasonable manner. So, to act one has to unlearn these habits, to train oneself to speak out, to respond quickly, to act forcefully, irrespective of what one feels and in so doing to create the habit, not of "understanding," not of "attributing," the moment, but of giving up control and, in so doing, giving oneself up to the play.

Acting in my lifetime has grown steadily away from performance and toward what for want of a better term can only be called oral interpretation, which is to say a

pageantlike presentation in which actors present to the audience a prepared monologue complete with all the Funny Voices. And they call the Funny Voices emotional preparation.

In life there is no emotional preparation for loss, grief, surprise, betrayal, discovery; and there is none on-stage either.

Forget the Funny Voices, pick up your cue, and speak out *even though* frightened.

That is the meaning of character.

Here is the best acting advice I know. And when I am moved by a genius performance, this is what I see the actor doing: *Invent nothing, deny nothing*. This is the meaning of character.

I've heard young actors speak of "stepping out." They felt constrained by the above suggestions, and they wanted, finally, a "part to tear a cat in," in which they could strut their stuff. They wanted to invent, to mold, to elaborate, to influence, to be a "transformational actor"—to be, in effect, anything but themselves.

No doubt, for the grass is always greener. But the so-attractive actions listed above are the work of the *writer*. It is the writer's job to make the play interesting. It is the *actor's* job to make the performance truthful.

When the performance is made truthful, the work of the writer is made something more than words on the page, not by the inventiveness, but by the *courage* of the actor. Yes, it might seem like a good, and might seem an attractive idea to embellish—it's your job to *resist* that attractive idea; for you cannot both "guide" the performance, and keep your attention and will on accomplishing your objective onstage. The impulse to "help it along," to add a bit of "emotion" or "behavior" is a good signpost—it means you are being offered—in resisting it—the possibility of greatness. *Invent nothing. Deny nothing. Develop that hard habit.*

It takes great strength of character—which is formed only over time and in frightening times—to

make difficult, and many times upsetting, decisions. Act first to desire your own good opinion of yourself.

Today's vast amusement parks, "theme parks," offer not amusement but the possibility of amusement. Like the lottery, which offers not money but the possibility of money. Similar is the academic/serfdom/great-chain-of-being paradigm from which our current western system derives. We are trying to please the teacher, to get into the good undergraduate school, to get into the good graduate school, to get into the good postgraduate program, to get into the good job.

The actor strives to please the panel, to get into the good professional studio, to please the casting director, please the agent, please the critic, and so progress. "But progress to *what?*" I ask you.

These schematic, arithmetical models, while reassuring, are false. To serve in the real theatre, one needs to be able to please the audience and the audience only. This has nothing to do with the great chain of being, or the academic model. The opinion of teachers and peers is skewed, and too much time spent earning their good opinion unfits one for a life upon the stage. By the time one is twenty-eight years old and has spent twenty-three of those years in a school of some sort, one is basically unfit to work onstage as an actor. For one has spent most of one's life learning to be obedient and po-

lite. Let me be impolite: most teachers of acting are frauds, and their schools offer nothing other than the right to consider oneself part of the theatre.

Students, of course, do need a place to develop. That place is upon the stage. Such a model can and probably will be more painful than a life spent in the studios. But it will instruct.

And it is probably finally kinder to the audience to subject them to untutored exuberance than to lifeless and baseless confidence.

~~clearly in an attempt to get what you want from the other actor. If you learn the words by rote, as if they were a phone book, and let them come out of your mouth without your interpretation, the audience will be well served.~~

Begin: Consider our friends the politicians. The politician who trots out the “reverent” parts of the speech “reverently,” the “aggressive” parts “staunchly,” the “emotional” parts “feelingly”—that person is a fraud, and nothing of what he or she would have you believe is true. How do we know we cannot trust them? We know because they are lying to you. Their very delivery is a lie. They have lied about what they feel in order to manipulate you.

We do not embellish those things we care deeply about.

Just as with the politician, the actor who puts on Funny Voices is a fraud. She may, granted, have a “good idea” about the script; but the audience isn’t looking for a person with a “good idea” about the script. They are looking for a person who can *act*—who can bring to the script something they couldn’t have learned or imagined from reading it in a library. The audience is looking for spontaneity, for *individuality*, for strength. They aren’t going to get it from your tired old interpretive powers.

Here is what I have learned in a lifetime of play-writing: *It doesn’t matter how you say the lines.* What matters is what you mean. What comes from the heart goes to the heart. The rest is Funny Voices.