Acting on the script

To connect with the audience, get connected with the play

By Bruce Miller

MOST OF THE TIME when I ask beginning actors about the work they are doing at any given moment, they want to tell me about their characters' feelings. Does that sound familiar?

Sometimes, even when I'm working with professional actors—actors who are capable of producing believable work any time they pick up a script—they cannot always account for the choices that they are making. They are being guided by their spontaneous emotions and can't necessarily connect those emotions with the script they are working from. This, in my opinion, does not add up to reliable craft, and it is not a technique that will faithfully serve them or the scripts they are working with.

On the other hand, when actors make their primary focus what their characters are *doing*, rather than what they are *feeling*, they are more often than not making choices based on the script. In those cases, the audience is likely to be able to discern what the characters are feeling, and are far more likely to understand why those characters do what they do as the play or film unfolds. That is, of course, if the actions are well selected and executed, and if the actions serve the script. It is only through the appropriate and combined actions of the characters in a play that the story laid out in that script by the playwright can be effectively told.

Gary Sinise as George and John Malkovich as Lennie in Steppenwolf Theater's 1980 production of Of Mice and Men.

LISA EBRIGHT

An audience may, for a short time, be able to appreciate the fact that an actor can conjure up seemingly real tears and cry at will, or generate enough anger to single-handedly destroy a city. But these emotional displays quickly lose their appeal. The audience grows weary of them and turns its attention to what's going happen next.

The other problem with playing emotions is it often doesn't communicate much. An audience can never see directly into the hearts and minds of a play's characters, no matter how connected an actor is. They can only determine a character's thoughts and feelings through what the character does and says. What an audience wants, what they have come to the theatre for in the first place, is the story.

It is an actor's job, then, to tell stories, clearly and dramatically and believably. The best acting always serves the play. It is not enough that an actor comes off well to an audience. A good actor must come to accept his or her responsibility for bringing to life the work of the playwright. When the play is worthy, the actor will invariably best serve himself and the production by paying close attention to what the playwright has provided.

The definition of good acting, then, is *acting that is believable and tells the best possible story while serving the script.* This definition can serve as a compass for you from here on in—in any acting situation in which you find yourself—if you let it.

Serving the script, and drawing from it

One of the central tenets of this article and the ones that will follow is the belief that reliably good acting results from an active connection between the actor and his or her source material—the script. At first, this might seem like a constriction that will compromise your creativity as an actor, but it will actually have the opposite effect. By making choices that come from a logical analysis of the script, you will enhance your ability to act effectively. Here's what I mean.

Suppose I asked you to write an essay. Any topic, you decide. An open-ended, unspecific assignment like that is difficult even for an accomplished writer. No borders or guidelines have been laid out, and infinite possibility can easily lead to stagnation.

But suppose instead I ask you to write an essay on acting. That would help you somewhat, because you are no longer staring at a night sky that seems endless. Now suppose I ask you to write an essay on your favorite actor and why he or she is so. Ideas for your essay are now congealing, and even if the paper has not begun to write itself, you have a path to follow.

That's how it works with acting, too. Knowing what to do on stage or for the camera can be as daunting as writing an essay, if you don't go into it with a clear-cut set of parameters. Telling the story contained in the script gives you such parameters. In fact when carefully read, a script is like a blueprint of the building you must construct, a map of the journey you must make. The secret is in learning how to read the blueprint, and discovering the steps to take to build the building or make the journey successfully. If you are going to act well and dependably, it is your responsibility as an actor to make choices based on the story that is told in the script. This article is devoted to providing you with some ways to do that.

Conflict

Stories start with conflict, the engine of drama. Playwrights and screenwriters do not write with the hope of someday finding their work included in a literary anthology. They write because they want to see their work produced for the stage or screen. The better the story, the more likely it is that their goal will be met. Audiences go to the theatre or to the movies to see a good story.

Any good story starts with a conflict and it is the conflict that sustains the action of a story from the time it is introduced until it is resolved at the end of the play or movie. Even when characters seem to be just talking, the good dramatist is moving the action of the story forward somehow. That means that conflict is always present. It is your job to recognize that conflict and use it to propel the story forward at all times. If there is no obvious conflict present, then the more you can create, within the given framework of character and story, the more interesting you and the story will be. When the conflict is clearly apparent, the bigger you can make it, the better for the story and for your work. If you're working with another actor on stage or on screen, rest assured that there is something going on between your character and that other character, and whatever it is, it must be related to the C word.

Consider the first scene in John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men.* Two men, George and Lennie, make a camp on the banks of the Salinas River. They drink from the river. They talk about where they've been and where they're going. They eat some beans. Lennie, who has a childlike quality about him, asks George to retell a familiar story, and George does.

You might read that scene and describe the action as *two people on stage together, just talking.* What's wrong with this picture? The word "just" is a giveaway. If any dramatic description begins with a minimizing word like "just," chances are you're headed for acting trouble. "Just" is a problem avoider, and as an actor you always want there to be a problem for your character to overcome. That's dramatic. That's the way the writer is thinking, so if you find a way to minimize his or her craft, then you're probably heading in the wrong direction.

Better to think like this: *Ah, two people on stage together, what's their conflict? If I find that I find the core of the scene, and I find something active to play.*

Yes, George and Lennie are sitting around a campfire just talking. Except they're not. The good analyzer will quickly realize that Steinbeck has written a lot of conflict into the scene. George and Lennie have had a long and difficult history together by the time the play opens. Their history is, in actor terms, the characters' given circumstances, which are revealed in their dialogue. The audience is hearing this background information for the first time, but George and Lennie are well aware of it. George wants to find peace, and Lennie wants, in his childlike mind, to have his every whim satisfied right now. These are the actions that the actors playing the characters must focus on. Lennie is the obstacle to George's finding peace, and George is the obstacle to Lennie's having his desires met. All of this comes out in the conflict of the scene if the actors bring to the scene the build-up of their past experiences together. Overcoming obstacles provides conflict when actors playing characters go after their needs full out, when they play their individual actions.

Without the conflict in evidence, the opening scene of *Of Mice and Men* is merely exposition, and not dramatically interesting. With the given circumstances acknowledged and used by the actors at the play's opening, conflict can be played out to dramatic effect. As a result, their characters' needs (objectives, actions, intentions), and therefore what they must do to obtain their goals, become clear, and who they are as characters quickly begins to emerge.

Here is another example that might be familiar to you. This one is from *The Glass Menagerie*—the scene between the Gentleman Caller and Laura. Is this a dull scene in which the two characters discuss old times and Laura shows Jim her glass collection? Or is it a scene in which a lonely girl tries to make a connection with the man of her dreams, convinced that if she fails, it is all over for her? Is it a scene in which a polite but disinterested young man passes some idle time, or one in which he senses what is at stake for the girl, and

must find a way to extricate himself from the situation as gently but as quickly as possible? The difference in how you as an actor perceive the scene can mean all the difference in the world as to how you play it. Even in the perception, the difference in the power of the story is quite obvious.

It should be coming clear to you now that while it is the writer's job to provide the blueprint for the story, it is your job to recognize that story and to flesh it out through the choices you make and execute as the actor playing the character. Simply relying on your instincts will not be enough most of the time. When the choices are infinite, reaching into the haystack and grabbing a handful of hay is likely not to produce any needles.

Actions, actions, actions

Even when you correctly decipher the story you are playing, and choose actions to execute that will serve it, there remains the obligation to communicate that story clearly to an audience. Many actors, especially film actors, believe that if they are feeling the scene moment by moment that those feelings are being communicated directly and clearly to the audience. While it is true that the camera can pick up emotional nuances that would never be readable by an audience in the theatre, it is not necessarily true that the film audience is picking up all that is intended simply because the actor is thinking it and feeling it. Nor is it true that what an actor naturally thinks and feels is what is best to reveal for the unfolding story.

As an actor you must make choices objectively and find ways to communicate those choices to the audience. The primary tool for communicating with an audience is through the physical actions you choose to execute, and the manner in which you execute those choices. An audience, in spite of what film actors sometimes think, cannot read minds and hearts. But they can form an understanding of what characters may be thinking and feeling from the actions they see characters carrying out, or by connecting what they see a character do with what they already know about him or her. Sometimes actors produce these clarifying physical actions naturally and spontaneously, but not always.

You must be willing to inspect and harvest the physical choices that come naturally to you, and keep the ones that work. They may be further amplified through repetition and rehearsal—making them more specific while keeping their natural quality. Where no physical actions naturally spring from the context intuitively, you must be willing to step outside your subjective, in-the-moment self and look at the work from the audience's perspective. This will lead you to think of what actions in the situation might communicate your character's thoughts and feelings to the audience. Then it becomes a matter of finding effective ways to execute those choices.

The Lennie who gulps his water from the creek in the opening scene from *Of Mice and Men* is a different Lennie than the one who carefully dips in his hand trying to keep his sleeve from getting wet. The one who angrily demands that George tell him the story of the ranch and the rabbits is a different man than the one who pleads gently for the same story. The George who picks up after himself following his temper tantrum is different from the one who kicks the garbage viciously out of the way. The George who invests in the ranch story and is drawn into it in spite of himself is a far different George from the one who completes the story as he began it, grudgingly. The George and Lennie who are physically demonstrative of their love for each other are different from the ones who avoid physical contact.

All of these actions, physical or psychological, either come spontaneously through the rehearsal process, or have been invented by the actors to best serve the story as they perceive it. But each individual choice in combination with others makes for a slightly different set of moments, and ultimately a different story being told, inhabited by characters unique to that specific production. The overall blueprint was provided by the playwright, but that particular *Of Mice and Men* will be like no other. And, one hopes, the combination of choices that are made for the production will bring out the playwright's story more clearly and compellingly than any that came before it.

Listening and being in the moment

What I've been discussing here might be called a thought-to-action approach to acting. Still, in order to be *believable* on stage or on film—that third element of the definition of good acting—it is necessary to be available and connected to your fellow actors at every moment you are on stage with them. No matter how brilliant your choices may be, acting in a vacuum will not serve the play, and will never connect with the audience. Every carefully thought-out acting choice must be adjusted to whatever actually happens around you on stage. If something fed to you by your acting partners in performance is different than it was in rehearsal, you must make an adjustment. These little notes of spontaneity and reaction create the illusion of "happening for the first time," and give actors the chance to truly live in the moment. This is one of the reasons why no two performances of a play are ever quite the same. There is an infinite number of ways to tell the story effectively, but acting without listening is not one of them.

The biggest difference between the work of a talented high school actor and those with a higher level of training, and the biggest difference between the best film or stage actors and the others, is often connected to the ability to listen. By listening I mean listening with all your senses. It means reacting to what is put before you.

The best high school actors are often those who are deemed to be reliable performers. "No matter what," the compliment goes, "Johnny gives it that same money performance every time he sets foot on stage!" That's great, up to a point. But the fact is that sometimes this compliment means that in spite of whatever happens on stage that is new or different, Johnny will give that same performance, even if it means ignoring

the multitude of changes that may occur from performance to performance. This concentration on what has been rehearsed is often admired in high school, but it becomes an obstacle to the development of the more sophisticated level of work demanded in the profession. The best acting does not seem performed. It seems spontaneous even when it is well rehearsed. Reacting in the moment because there is listening going on is what gives acting the illusion of spontaneity.

Here's an example. If you've ever been in an acting class, you've probably noticed how students are often very believable and exciting on stage when they are asked to do an improv. They have this uncanny ability to connect with their fellow actors and react in the moment, picking up on every vocal, verbal, and physical cue that comes their way. They are able to see everything that we can see and hear from our safe vantage point in the audience. But when these same actors are asked to read from a script, their spontaneity and their ability to react moment-to-moment almost completely disappear. The reason, of course, is that when they are improvising, they are focused on the other actors and listening with all of their senses, but when they are doing their scripted work, their focus is on the script and on what they will have to say next.

In scene study class, I often ask student actors to improv a scene they can't seem to find the handle on. Invariably, when they remove themselves from the obligations of focusing on what they will say next, they start making many moment-to-moment discoveries. Very often these step-by-step discoveries help the actors find their purpose in the scene and the story that has been eluding them when they were rehearsing. Of course, it is also true that when they attempt to go back to the scene as written, they sometimes lose much of what they had learned in the improv—unless I force them to focus on each other rather than on the words they are struggling with. Since plays are not primarily about the words but rather about the story being told, the good actor has learned that dialogue is no more or less important than the other tools an actor must employ in order to effectively tell the story. Listening on stage is one of those tools.

Every actor who can read a script efficiently automatically begins to create a movie in his head about what the scene will look like and sound like, and about how each scene should unfold and be played out. No two actors' movies will be alike. When actors come together to rehearse, they will bring with them all the homework preparation they have done on their script. But since no two actors' mental movies are alike, each will have to give up aspects of his or her own movie and create, through the rehearsal process, a new, shared version. This new version will accommodate the actual give and take based on the choices being made by each actor, both prepared and spontaneous. Eventually, through the rehearsal process, all prepared choices will be forgotten because the rehearsal process will have engrained them into the actor. They'll be there, but the actors will no longer have to think about them. It is then that actors are fully available to be in the moment and create the magic that the best actors create.

In summary then, acting is an amalgam of:

- Reading a script and interpreting it accurately.
- Making choices that are exciting and believable, and tell the story effectively.
- Executing physically the choices decided upon so that they are clear and believable to an audience.
- Listening in the moment to create the illusion that it all is unfolding for the first time.

In upcoming articles, we will examine how these basic tools can be developed through hard work, common sense, and an ability to take and use feedback.

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