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Character IS ACTION

Part three in a series on the actor's craft

BY BRUCE MILLER

DURING THE COURSE of your education you've probably heard your teachers say countless times, "I just told you that! You're not listening!" Often this is the teacher's exasperated response when someone asks a question she just answered a moment before, or when she discovers that only three people out of thirty seem to have heard the assignment she made the day before. The truth is, we have become a society of bad listeners.

There are a lot of theories that attempt to explain this phenomenon. For instance, the notion that we've changed into a visual society as a result of television and the internet, or the hypothesis that we have become a selfish society more interested in hearing ourselves talk than listening to others. The fact is, whatever the reason, listening is not something that we do very well. Yet this is a skill that is absolutely necessary to any actor worth his good reviews.

In life, it's when things are hanging in the balance and our wellbeing depends upon it that we really start to listen. This is true even for those of us who are bad listeners. For example, when your father starts to tell you why you won't be using the car for

the next month, you're probably listening. When your girlfriend starts explaining why she's through with you, you're probably listening. When the cop pulls you over at five till midnight and asks you for your license, you're certainly listening. And in all these troubling situations, you're probably listening with all your senses—everything your ears, your eyes, and even your skin, can take in. You're looking for a road out, a scheme to save yourself, a way to turn an awful moment around and draw victory from defeat. These real life examples are high-stakes situations, ones that require your complete attention.

The tense scenarios described above are the kinds of situations that plays and movie scripts are all about. But of course what happens on stage or on film, though resembling everyday life, is seldom like everyday life for long. Plays and films must tell a good story if they are to be successful, and good stories require conflict and big stakes, plus the twists and turns that guarantee that the audience will want to see what happens next.

In the previous two articles of this series we talked about this in detail. Conflict, the engine of drama, you'll remember, is the playwright's best friend. It serves the actor equally well. An actor must find the conflict in the acting situation, determine the objectives to be played, and find the physical actions to carry out these objectives. This is all part of the rehearsal process that any good actor goes through. As actors we must learn to make choices that tell the story clearly and compellingly while staying faithful to the script. In other words, we must take what the playwright has given us and not only bring it to life, but enhance it as well. Good actors learn to make exciting choices and execute them clearly and smoothly so that they resemble what people do in their daily lives. When we're well rehearsed, our choices become so much a part of our bones and psyches that they seem totally spontaneous.

No matter how effectively we rehearse and how well we know what we are supposed to do, nothing on stage ever happens quite the same way twice—because it's happening live. Actors don't always do exactly the same thing, and they don't always say what they have to say in exactly the same way. At least good actors don't. Skilled actors continue to pursue their objectives at all times and are sensitive to any and all nuances that pop up before them. That means they will adjust their actions according to what is going on in the moment of a scene just as they would in life. When two good actors are working together, there is a give and take that keeps things fresh, alive, and new.

That ability to adapt to changing circumstances, by the way, often marks the difference between an untrained performer and those who act well, whether at the high school, college, or professional level. A novice actor is often praised for her energy and ability to put it out there consistently no matter what is happening around her. But if this performer disregards or ignores what is happening around her, chances are what she does will look less than real or believable. Plus, she is liable to sound canned or hammy rather than spontaneous. If we play our choices exactly as we rehearsed them without regard for the nuances and subtle changes that may occur, we will look like we are *acting* rather than living in the moment. And if we fail to remember what we have rehearsed and trust that it really is planted in our bones and psyches, we will not be available during our stage lives to notice and react to the new stuff that is happening all the time. Any good actor will tell you that acting is reacting. You can't react to what you don't see and hear. It's those reactions that keep actors vibrant and compelling, and audiences on the edges of their seats.

Learning to listen

In the last few years, I have been doing what I used to think was a very simple game with my beginning acting students. Maybe you've done something similar in your own classes—it's an exercise that's rooted in the repetition work championed by the late acting teacher Sanford Meisner (see the sidebar on page xx for examples).

The game goes something like this: I have my students sit in a large circle with their legs crossed. I tell them we will be playing a repetition game—one in which they will have to watch and listen carefully if they are to play effectively. I tell them that the game is simple. All they will have to do is repeat exactly what the person before them says and does. I then give the first person a phrase to repeat to the person sitting next to him or her. Since we are playing in a circle, I make an arbitrary decision where to start, and tell that first person to repeat the message either to the person to her left or her right. It doesn't matter. We will be changing directions repeatedly as the game goes on. The message I give to the first person might be something like this:

"You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink," or "you can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him sink," or "the early bird catches no moss or rolling stones."

I might suggest a quote from Shakespeare instead, or read a safety direction on the wall that catches my eye, or simply make something up extemporaneously. It doesn't matter. The point is that the class is to repeat exactly what they have seen and heard from the person before them, and they must repeat it exactly as they have seen and heard it down to the smallest detail they can. Easy, right? Actually, it's not.

To get the students more attuned to what I want them to do, I preface the game with a few words on the importance of listening as an actor. More specifically, I tell them that being able to listen on stage is one of the most important skills they can learn during their acting studies. I also point out that the term *listening* doesn't only refer to what the ears do.

It means listening with all their senses—with their eyes, with their sense of touch, with everything, as they would in life. I tell them that in life we take in information about the people who surround us using *all* our senses.

I conclude my introduction by reminding them that, even in conversation, we are learning as much from what people *do* as from what they say, and we learn as much from how people say what they say as from the words themselves. We watch body language, we listen for nuance, we give context to the words we hear. We look for subtext in the context. We process constantly the information we receive. We analyze even when we are not aware of it. We intuitively react to stuff we are not even consciously aware of. This is what we do in life, and this must be part of what we do on stage if we expect to be believable.

To start the game, I give that first person the phrase or sentence she must repeat. I look her directly in the eyes and lean in close to her face as I say the line, "Water is life, my friend, no more, no less." Or something equally weird. Depending on what I say, the class will laugh or grow silent in response to the line, or in anticipation of the repetition. All of them will be extremely attentive. The person who I am talking to will either laugh along with the class or be so focused that she will ignore what surrounds her. She will take in my phrase, turn to the person to the left, and repeat what I just said—exactly as I delivered it, in tone of voice and physical motion.

Except it never happens that way.

The game rarely gets past the first or second person without my having to stop the action. My classes can't seem to repeat what they've heard in the manner it is said to them. To begin with, they almost always ignore the part of the introductory speech I have just given them—the part about listening with all their senses. Then they either change the reading of the line, or they alter the music of the line, or they add or take away pauses. Sometimes my actors don't even get the words right. Physically, eye contact changes, body gestures are missed or altered, or there is no give and take (the moment-to-moment discovery and reaction to what is being said, which in life we do automatically).

Once I do allow the game to go from person-to-person several times without interruption—in spite of the fact that the phrase has not been copied accurately—actors will miss major changes as well, and simply default back to an earlier version of what was said and done. I once had a student who, with a slip of the tongue, accidentally changed "the early bird catches the worm," to "the early bird catches the word," and the receiving person proceeded to go back to worm when he passed the sentence on. Everyone else caught the slip and laughed, but the receiver was totally oblivious. This happens quite often, actually. So why is this? How can this be?

The short answer is we don't listen, especially when we're acting. Often the receivers in the game are so worried about getting it right—focusing on remembering what has been said and done up to that point, or so busy cataloguing what they must do—that they are simply unavailable to listen and react to the person speaking. Most of us are guilty of this acting contradiction. I know I am. Here is a little confession: When I act, which I do occasionally, I find that especially in the early stages of rehearsal—the time when I'm still learning my lines—I sometimes don't recognize the cue lines when my partner says them. Often it's because I'm only half listening. I'm focused instead on what I need to say next. I'm busy thinking about my next line when I should be listening with all my senses to my partner. What I say next should almost always come directly from what I as the character have just heard. The playwright wrote it that way, after all. Obviously, if I'm not fully listening, coming up with my next line will be more difficult, since it is inspired by the previous one.

In the first two articles of this series, our time was spent on analysis and synthesis—figuring out what's going on in the script and finding effective ways to do what we need to do in order to make it all work. We can make the best possible choices, but if we're not listening, the audience won't believe us. On the other hand, compelling moment-to-moment work can make an audience completely forget that what we are doing may have little to do with moving the play forward. My own definition of good acting includes telling the story, being believable, and listening well. Of course, it is the actor's obligation to effectively tell the story the playwright has provided, but believability will always have primacy. And believability is totally connected to your listening skills.

If you've ever watched a prepared first reading of a scene in acting class, you know just what I'm talking about. By "prepared first reading" I mean that first time you put up a scene with a partner. You have done your homework. That means you've analyzed the scene, made choices about how you're going to tell the story, identified the conflict, isolated your objectives, and determined where the big moments are. Although you haven't memorized the lines, you are familiar enough with them to read without stumbling. If you're a student in my class, you do that first read sitting down, because I don't want you to have to worry about all your physicality right now—that's one too many things to have to think about. So basically all you have to do is execute your choices in terms of objectives and *listen*. Sounds simple enough, right? But, again, that's not what usually happens in my intro scene study class.

Using your senses, looking at your partner

In the first several weeks of my introductory scene study class, even after repeated warnings and explanations about how the first read should be done, most of the time my actors

The repetition games of Sanford Meisner

The legendary Sanford Meisner spent his career as an acting teacher focused on the listening elements of acting. The repetition games he invented are among the best ways to develop your onstage listening skills. There are several books available by or about Meisner and his work. Two of the best are *Sanford Meisner on Acting* by Sanford Meisner and Dennis Longwell (Vintage Books, 1987) and *The Sanford Meisner Approach* series by Larry Silverberg (Smith and Kraus, 1998).

Here's a taste of what Meisner's approach is about. For best results, do these exercises while actually rehearsing a scene with your partner before you bring it into class.

1. After your partner delivers a line, simply say, "What?" This will give your partner a chance to say her line again and it will give you another shot at listening specifically to what is being said to you. Her line will probably improve because she will intensify it. Yours will improve because she has intensified it, and because you've now had a second chance to put your listening hat on.

2. Repeat each line from the script that your partner says to you. You may change the pronouns. For instance:

Your partner says the line, "I never much liked you."

You say, "You never much liked me."

Your partner says, "You never gave me anything; you were a lousy brother."

You say, "I never gave you anything; I was a lousy brother."

This exercise guarantees that you've heard what was said to you, and forces you to consider the context and subtext.

3. After you deliver a line, say, "What did I just say?"

This will keep you connected with your partner, and will challenge him into making sure that he is listening. Demanding his attention will probably result in his giving it to you. As a variation, try not asking the question after every line. Surprise him. That way you keep your partner on his toes and force him to listen on his own.

4. After your scene partner delivers a line, say "What is that supposed to mean?"

Your scene partner will then be forced to improvise her subtext, and will be obliged to actually know why she is saying what she says. It will remind you to listen specifically to what is being said because as an actor *you have to.*

—B.M.

keep their noses in their scripts the entire reading. If they do ever look at each other, the eye contact is so brief, it's like giving the other actor an occasional kiss on the cheek and thinking you've had an intimate moment. This, of course, prevents the actors from any possibility of picking up on any of the in-the-moment things that might be going on and building on them—the most important way to add depth to the story provided by the playwright. And the main reason there is no eye contact? I suspect it's because the actors are afraid they won't be ready to say their next line. But by focusing entirely on what they will be saying next, they miss the opportunity to make an acting moment by listening and being in that moment. In another piece of irony, it is the finding and making of moments that is the measure of an actor's skill, not the ability to read the words from a script. Why then are so many young actors obsessed with reading the lines rather than playing the moments that tell the story?

My guess is that many young actors think that the words of a script are synonymous with the story of the play. In other words, they often believe that the words are the be-alls and end-alls of acting. They're not. Dialogue is just one of the tools a playwright uses to tell the story. There is also the action. Most of the action, physical and otherwise, is implied rather than stated directly by the playwright, or it must be figured out from scratch by actors and their directors. But storytelling action is every bit as important as the words being said. Just ask anyone who has ever acted in a Chekhov play. That means moments should be discovered through homework, but they must also be uncovered through listening and reacting. Every actor reads a play and makes a movie in his head picturing how the play should go. But no actor and his scene partner will ever have the identical movie. Therefore both of them must create their own version and find a new movie together, one that is built through listening to each other and making the necessary adjustments.

I make a point of urging my students to look at each other, even in a first read of a scene. Invariably, they immediately start listening as well—with all their senses. Once actors begin to make this kind of connection the story is fuller and more clear. The actors start reacting to each other, and those reactions start becoming spontaneous—which in turn creates new textures to be used and reacted to, and also makes the arc of the storyline more interesting. Granted it's not easy to make eye contact when you're still learning with a script inhand. But the fact is, in a first read, no one cares if you have to interrupt yourself and pause to find the next line. The payoff is always worth it.

With practice any actor can learn to look down at his script, take in a line or two, look up, and deliver it effectively to his scene partner. He can also teach himself the discipline to keep eye contact through his scene partner's response and her delivery of her next line, and until he has re-

acted to her line. He can train himself to do all that before he returns his to his script, where the process will begin again.

Keep in mind that the kind of listening we're talking about here extends to our other senses as well. What we learn from eye contact includes all the information we get from gesture and movement, too. Any in-the-moment physicality can produce a moment and a reaction as much as the words do. This idea also extends to props and scenery when you get to those things later in the rehearsal process.

Here's a scenario that illustrates what I'm talking about: You enter a room. You see a suitcase on the floor. Why is luggage sitting out? The window shades are pulled, but it's the middle of the day. What's going on? You notice that dresser drawers are open and there are several spaces open on the shelves where books and CDs used to be. Why is your scene partner sitting on the sofa in his coat? Why is he leaning forward clutching her knees? Why is he wearing those sunglasses? Why does he turn away as you approach him? (This last item is a blocking choice, but even a first reading in my class can be filled with subtle in-the-chair physicalization that can and should be dealt with.)

You say something, and your scene partner stands and moves away from you. What does that tell you? How does that change you? What adjustments should you make? Your scene partner moves away from you as you approach him. What do you learn from that? What does it cause you to do? Your scene partner turns toward you suddenly and touches you. What does that mean? How do you react? How should you react? It certainly produces a moment that you might not have been aware of. When we are touched in life, it is often a big deal. Since on stage we are always on the lookout for a big deal to play, here is one that flies right into your glove. Squeeze it. Use it. You say your next line in response to the touch you've been given. Suddenly the line takes on a different meaning, something that is connected to that touch. That is far better than the old movie you gave up when you took on a partner. You lean in, you touch your scene partner back. He averts his eyes, and turns away again. What does that mean? You put your hand on your partner's shoulder. Your scene partner looks back at you, then turns away again. He says his next line. It now means something completely different. You get the idea. Listening happens with all your senses.

If you ever have a chance to watch professional actors read for a role, you will notice that the ones who most impress you are the ones who are making eye contact. They are listening and reacting. They are finding moments and doing things. They are building on what they are receiving. Almost invariably, this is the kind of actor who ultimately gets the roles. I also know through my own experience as an actor that when I audition with someone who insists on staying connected with me, not only is the scene better, I am better too. Being forced to react brings out my truer, more compelling stuff. The director, in turn, gets far more excited when things are happening between actors than when someone is chewing the furniture all by himself. If there are two people on stage, there had better be stuff happening between them. That means listening, listening, listening.

Remember, as an actor, there are three primary things you'll need to learn how to do if you're going to have the requisite tools necessary for success. You'll need to be able to analyze a script, you'll need to be able to translate what you've learned from your analysis into actions that you can play clearly and compellingly on the stage, and you'll need to be able to integrate all of that so well into your body and mind that you will be able to live in the moment on stage. If you are going to be believable, you will simply have to be available to see what the audience is able to see, and respond to everything that's there—just as you do in life. All of these things take practice and dedication. Developing your skills as an actor is no different than developing skills for playing the piano, or dancing well. You must put in the time. Because acting looks so easy when it's well done, actors often forget this simple fact: it's what you do and how you do it that takes all the effort and it's ultimately what makes you an artist. It's all about what I noted at the outset of this series—honing one's craft and developing a set of tools that can make your acting more effective. And that's what you must constantly work to improve. So, keep practicing. And listening—at every moment. ▼