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What's the story?

Reading between the lines of the script

By Bruce Miller

IMAGINE FOR A MOMENT that you are at an audition and you have just been handed a sheet of paper on which you find the following dialogue.

A. Hello!
B. Hi.
A. Well. See ya.
B. Yeah. Bye.

So what do you do? You're going to be called in to read in a few moments, and this is the script that they gave you. If you read the first article in this series last month, you know that my advice would be to study the script and find the story. But there is no story in these lines, you're thinking.

Ah, but there is. There always is, if you're willing to do the work to find it. And having a story to tell as you audition will serve you far better as an actor than just reading the lines. If you find the story, you'll find a way to look good as an actor.

The script is all you have, so let's look at the lines. Since you and your scene partner are going to have to say them in

the order in which they are written, let's assume that there is a sequence of cause and effect—that one line leads to another, because playwrights think that way. Something happens. What happens causes a reaction that then causes something else to happen. This is the way plots work.

We can see that the sequence of lines begins with a greeting and a response. "Hello." "Hi." This seems pretty straightforward. But then there is a "Well." The "Well" can only suggest that something has happened after B's "Hi" to elicit that response. What it is we do not know. But at least we now have a clue to the unfolding story.

Then A says "See ya." Again this suggests that something must have happened because the two characters, for whatever reason, are now ready to separate, even though they just greeted one another. What happened between them? We'll never know from the lines themselves—there's just not enough information there—and since there is no previous scene, following scene, stage direction, commentary, or criticism to go to for clues, we simply have to settle for the fact that *something* happened.

The importance of what a character does

This is a very important basic point about acting and playwriting. Very often actors think that plays are about dialogue. Pick up the script, say the words, do the play. That is a big misconception. Plays tell stories, true, but the dialogue is just one tool the playwright uses to tell that story. The words of the play are no more or less important than the other devices used to make the story unfold. What a character *does* is every bit as important as what she says. Since we have only bare-bones dialogue above, we can conclude that there must be hidden action to this story—action that the playwright has not told us about. If it is not provided, then we as actors must invent that action. But as we do so, we must keep in mind that we are still responsible for justifying in the text every choice we make. In other words any action we provide must be consistent with the words the playwright has given us. This is our job as actors as we tell the story.

What a character does is every bit as important as what she says.

Let's take another look at the dialogue.

A. Hello!
B. Hi.
A. Well. See ya.
B. Yeah. Bye.

Now that you're more familiar with the words of the script, what do you think the "Well" means, and how does that "Well" lead to the "See ya" that suggests a leavetaking? Of course, we don't know for sure, but we do know that we will have to invent action that somehow justifies our saying it. B then says "Yeah," some sort of agreement with either A's "Well" or his "See ya," and says "Bye" himself.

The meaning of that "Well" is very important. It seems to be a response to something that has happened. The word itself has several definitions. As a noun it's a hole in the ground where water is found. As an adverb it describes how you feel or how you are doing. But neither of those meanings seems to fit the moment in the scene. It is most likely that A's "Well" is the place-holding kind, a word or phrase we use when we're not sure what to say next. If we accept the premise that something happened prior to the "Well," this use of the word can be justified in the text and will add to this moment in the story.

So we have a "Well" that suggests an awkward moment followed by a kind of goodbye. Why an awkward moment? Something really interesting must have happened before that "Well," right? This is good. We are beginning to have a suggestion of a story.

B agrees with a "Yeah," and then says "Bye" himself. The logical question to ask is why does B say "Yeah" before he says "Bye"? Why doesn't B simply say "Bye"?

Because that's not what the playwright wrote, you might be thinking. True as far as it goes, but in a play by a good playwright, we must assume that everything that is there is there for a reason. If the playwright chose to write "Yeah," then there is a reason for it.

We need to ask ourselves why, and why "Yeah," specifically rather than "Yes" or some other affirmative. When do we use that particular construction? In the context it seems to suggest a response that is not quite wholehearted, as though B doesn't really want to be hearing what A is saying. B's choice of "Bye" reinforces that theory. "Bye" in the context of our unfolding scenario seems small. B's heart is not really in it. Delivered a certain way, it can be a word we use to take our leave when we don't really want to be going. The character could have said, "Hasta la vista," "Until we meet again," "Farewell," or "Ciao." But the playwright gave B just a little diminutive "Bye."

So one way of reading the story in this little script—and it may not be the only way, but so long as it's supported by the text and the actors can agree on it, that doesn't matter—is that something happened between the opening greeting and the leave taking that has made our characters unhappy about saying goodbye. Their reluctance suggests that whatever happened must have been something big, because it changed their attitude. Big is good for the actor. It can lead to the telling of a good story.

Conflict and story

Let's recap. A and B greet each other. Something happens between them that causes them to not want to part from each other. Then they go their own ways, reluctantly. That's all we know. But what we now know is far more than what we knew before. It is also far more useful to us as actors. We now have a foundation on which to build a story. We now know the starting point and the finishing point of the story. We also know that whatever

happens in the middle causes the two characters to desire not to leave each other, although apparently they do, or at least there's a verbal farewell. So there is now an outline for a beginning, middle, and end—the necessary arc or throughline for any story.

The ambivalence about leaving suggests a conflict, and conflict is the engine of drama. It is the motor on which any story is based. There are essentially three kinds of conflict:

- A person against person.
- A person against himself or herself.
- A person against nature or society.

Of the three, the most useful for an actor and playwright is the first. Invariably when two people are put on stage or screen, a conflict can be found between them. A person against himself or herself is the second most common and useful conflict for an actor. A character who can't decide what to do or which of several choices to commit to can be very interesting, but this kind of conflict is much more difficult to convey to an audience than a direct person-to-person conflict. The nature conflict is most apparent in survival scenarios, and nature can usually be considered to be an obstacle to overcome. The character who is pitted against society is usually pitted against a series of individuals who represent that society—that is, more of the first kind of conflict.

Whatever the type of conflict, the fact is that without it, there is no story. And with it, you have a story filled with dramatic potential.

So, when A and B meet, something happens between them. They should or must leave each other but they don't want to. What is it then that happens, and why? Those questions are interesting ones. They spark our curiosity, make us speculate, and cause us to want to fill in the blanks.

Reading actively

Before we pursue our hunt for the story any further, just a moment for some sidebar commentary. Note all the detective work we have done with the lines above. As we went through the dialogue step by step, what I pointed out probably seemed, on one level, rather obvious and elementary. It was. On the other hand, if I had not pointed out all these obvious spots on the map, would you have noticed them? And would you have considered their primary importance to solving the acting problems contained in this four-line script? If you are honest with yourself, the answer is probably no. You might not have considered that what we just did with the lines above as an acting problem at all—or a problem that needs to be solved by the actor.

In point of fact what we did above was not difficult. Nevertheless, it did require us to pay careful attention to the words on the page and apply to them a little practical common sense. Everyone reading this page is capable of doing that. And that is what actors must do, if they are going to solve the riddle of the script that leads to making good choices.

As an actor you must be willing to train yourself to read actively.

The difficult part of all this, if there is a difficulty at all, is in the way you read the printed word. As an actor you must be willing to train yourself to read actively. Unfortunately many actors are indifferent, at best, to reading. They do not like to read and do so unwillingly and unhappily when they have to.

If you think about what you do with a script as detective work, rather than that odious thing called reading, you will begin to condition yourself to read actively. Reading actively means that you are willing and able to ask the questions that you must ask yourself about the script while you are reading it. Finding the answers to those questions will lead you to solving the problem of the scene and the play. In other words, reading actively will lead you to the discovery of what the story is and how to play it. It will lead you to the actions that your character must execute in order for the story of the play to be told effectively. These actions will, in turn, ultimately take you a long way toward effectively creating the character you play for the audience.

What happened? Why?

Now back to our four-line play, and the subject of conflict. The only definite conflict we can discern occurs at the moment when it is time for the two characters to part from each other. Since there are no other facts known about these two characters and this situation, we can and must make up the other necessary details on our own. The only restrictions are that we must be able to justify the lines, and we must follow the definition of good acting—because it will serve us to do so. Remember that definition from last month: *To be believable and to tell the best possible story while serving the script.* Since we have already sucked out everything that is provided in the script, we don't need to worry about that any further. But we do need, of course, to be believable, and we do want to tell the best story we can. That means refocusing on the conflict.

The logical question: what would cause these two characters to not want to part from each other? The answer to that question will come through the given circumstances of the story and from the action up to this point. The given circumstances are the who, what, when, and where of the story. Who are characters involved in the action? What is it, exactly, that they are doing? When are they doing it, and where? This information is usually provided by the playwright in his or her stage directions, or provided through implication in the script by what characters say and do. We have none of that background stuff in our four-line play, so as actors we must provide it ourselves.

That doesn't mean our choices can be arbitrary. Any choices that we make should help tell the best possible story and serve the script as written. In our

four-line play there is an infinite number of choices that we can make. Infinite numbers are far harder to deal with than finite ones. The given circumstances of a fully fleshed-out play make possibilities far narrower and in some ways much easier, if we read actively. For the purposes of this exercise, the given circumstances are minimized to shine a light on the process of actively reading the text and making choices.

The question again then. What would cause our two characters to not want to part from each other? Since there is a change that comes after the greeting and before the "Well," it seems logical that something happens between the two characters, and the thing that happens makes them want or need to stay connected. The first thing that comes to my mind is love. Since there are no wrong answers here, the next question to ask is would having these two characters fall for each other make for a good story, and would that story be believable? I think the answer is yes. Could this choice be justified by the dialogue? Again I think the answer is yes. Finally is there a better choice that you could think of, a choice that would make for a better story? If there is, I leave that to you. But I can't think of one at the moment, so I am going to commit to that choice. Love, or some kind of attraction, makes these characters want to stay together.

The conflict then is that these two characters, as a result of seeing each other, want to stay together, but they can't. They must move on. Why? The dialogue suggests they do. There is that "See ya" and "Bye," after all. Perhaps you're thinking right now that maybe they say goodbye but don't really leave. I'm willing to accept that, but I'm not willing to say they just mutually decide not to go. That would not be interesting. That choice provides no conflict. Everything is easy, and therefore not interesting to watch, or, for that matter, to act.

The given circumstances

It is important to keep in mind that the story is interesting only when there is something at stake. When characters take risks, the story is interesting. When characters must overcome obstacles, the story is interesting. When characters share the stage with other characters who have opposing wants and needs, the story is very interesting. So even if both characters decide to stay, there must be something at risk, so that there is a source of conflict. What that is must be found in the given circumstances, which we as actors will have to provide ourselves, since the script has not provided them.

Suppose, for instance, that A and B are from different backgrounds. A's group hates B's group. A and B are teenagers, let's say, A is a boy, B a girl. This information constitutes the *who*. Suppose that A and B are out searching for food or firewood. That is the *what*. The scene takes place in the forest on the planet Z 94. That is the *where*. Suppose it is nightfall on an evening in the year 2783. That is the *when*.

Note that some of the given circumstances I've offered you are more useful than others. Having the scene take place in the forest, for instance, is useful. A forest conjures up things you can do and ways to do it. The planet Z 94 is less so. Little comes to mind that I can connect with that planet that will give me things as an actor to do. And if I came up with something bizarre to do because I have decided Z 94 is a strange planet, there is no guarantee that the audience will get that. They have no frame of reference for Z 94 either. Remember, the choices we make must serve the audience as well as ourselves. The stories we tell are for them.

Nightfall is good. Vision may be unreliable and that can provide obstacles and perhaps conflict. The year 2783 is far less useful. How will I be able to get across that this takes place far in the future, and does that really matter in the particular four-line play we are engaged in? Will setting the play in the future give me something to work with? Probably not. The point is if we are inventing given circumstances we want to invent circumstances that will add to the story and help make it clear.

Building the story

So the given circumstances that we have imposed on the lines of dialogue now provide a basic scenario from which we can build a story. Compare the lines with the scenario and see if the added given circumstances can be supported and justified by the lines.

A. Hello!
B. Hi.
A. Well. See ya.
B. Yeah. Bye.

The story goes something like this:

A, a teenage boy, and B, a teenage girl, from different tribes on the planet Z 94 are in the forest at nightfall, collecting food and wood. Suddenly, they stumble upon each other in a clearing. At first they don't see each other in the dimming light. Then, as they greet each other coolly, their eyes meet. Something strong between them is ignited. Though each of them needs to return home as quickly as possible, neither wants to leave. Finally, A realizes that the two of them have been magnetized to each other, and with an awkward word or two, he breaks the spell between them and unhappily starts to take his leave. B acknowledges that she too has been mesmerized but agrees that they must depart. With an impulsive gesture A moves toward B and gives her a light kiss on the cheek. As he pulls away, B grabs his hands, pulls him back to her, and returns his kiss with a far more passionate one on the lips. The two finally break away from the embrace, look at each other deeply, back away, and finally turn and run into the trees in separate directions.

Now that sounds like a pretty good story, right? A bit familiar, perhaps, but one that would certainly give you plenty to act and act well in the audition you are about to perform. Though I have embellished the scenario even more than we discussed earlier, there is nothing that I have added that is inconsistent with the lines that the playwright provided. I decided to have the characters kiss at the end of the scenario because I thought it made for a better story. It upped the stakes and added a risk factor.

The conflict, person versus person, was present at the beginning of the scene. Two enemies accidentally confronting each other would provide that conflict, but the eye contact between

them changes all that, so there is already a nice arc to the story. The characters are drawn to each other, but each knows that this is not right. Their conflict then becomes internal. There is no conflict as they kiss, but the conflict returns when each discovers, as Romeo and Juliet did, that they have "the desire to stay but need to go." The two vanishing into the woods after a fulfilling moment between them makes for a nice finish to the story, and gives it a solid beginning, middle, and end.

Notice that the description of the story above both implies and states directly the actions that the actors as characters would have to carry out. These actions are as important to the telling of the story and to the revelation of character as the dialogue is. In fact they're probably more so. This is an important lesson to keep in mind. Dialogue helps tell the story, but it is only one element of the storytelling machinery. What we do on stage or on screen is what tells the audience what we as characters are thinking and feeling and propels the story forward every bit as much as the words do.

The manner in which the described actions are carried out will further define the story and the characters doing them. Each kiss—and how it is actually physicalized by the actors—will add detail to the story. How each character reacts to the kiss will add to the story. Every physical detail, planned in advance or discovered in the moment will add to the story and to the characters telling that story. This leads me to a final point.

All of the analysis work described above is part of the homework every actor must do before putting his or her work up on the stage or screen. But once actors begin to work with each other, that homework must be adjusted to accommodate the other actor's choices. The actor playing A has brought his private mental movie to the audition. The actor playing B has brought hers. All their choices must be tuned so thay'll work within the movie that will result when the two actors put their choices together to create the actual scene. If A and B have time to work together before the audition, they can smooth out their differences through the rehearsal process. If they do not, then the two actors must be willing at every moment to listen to each other with all their senses. They must be willing to adjust to any new input as it develops. This will give the work the feel of happening for the first time.

Next: specific physical actions

Through the process of analysis described above we covered many of the tools cited in the first article in this series. We have analyzed the script starting with an active reading. We have found the conflict and arc of the story by discovering the cause-and-effect progression of the action. We have searched for the given circumstances and added to them where necessary in ways that would justify the script and add to it. We have maximized the conflict by adding risk and obstacle to our work. We have noted and developed the big moments in the unfolding story, and we have acknowledged that this basic game plan can be adjusted in accordance with how it plays out moment to moment with a scene partner.

It should be noted, however, that in an actual script, you will have to provide far fewer given circumstances solely from your imagination—because the playwright will probably provide you with much more to go on from the script. But that means you will have to read and analyze that script even more closely than we did above to find the details that will help you bring the work to life. You will need to sort through those given circumstances to find the ones that you can convert to actions that are clear and compelling on stage. This part of the work will always remain a challenge that you as an actor must face each time you pick up a new script to begin your work. You may come to consider it a challenge that brings you great pleasure as you continue to develop your craft.

What we have not done, of course, is to develop a series of specific physical actions that will serve us in telling the story. The scenario we worked out above suggests a number of those actions, but only the actual physicalization of those actions through the rehearsal process will enable us to fully bring them to life and make them work effectively. Nor have we examined the psychological actions of the scene from the viewpoint of the actors playing the characters. That means we have not specifically thought about what the characters do and what they want to accomplish by doing it. Again these have been suggested in our discussion, but these psychological actions actually require a much more specific scrutiny. Using both kinds of actions effectively, like so much of what an actor must do, starts with finding the conflict at the core of any play or scene. Playing actions effectively is the most important element in telling the story of the play clearly and compellingly for an audience. We will examine this aspect of the work more closely in the next article.

Bruce Miller, author of The Actor as Storyteller *and* Head-First Acting, *directs acting programs at the University of Miami. He's a regular contributor to* Dramatics *and* Teaching Theatre.

The third and concluding part of this series will appear in our January issue.