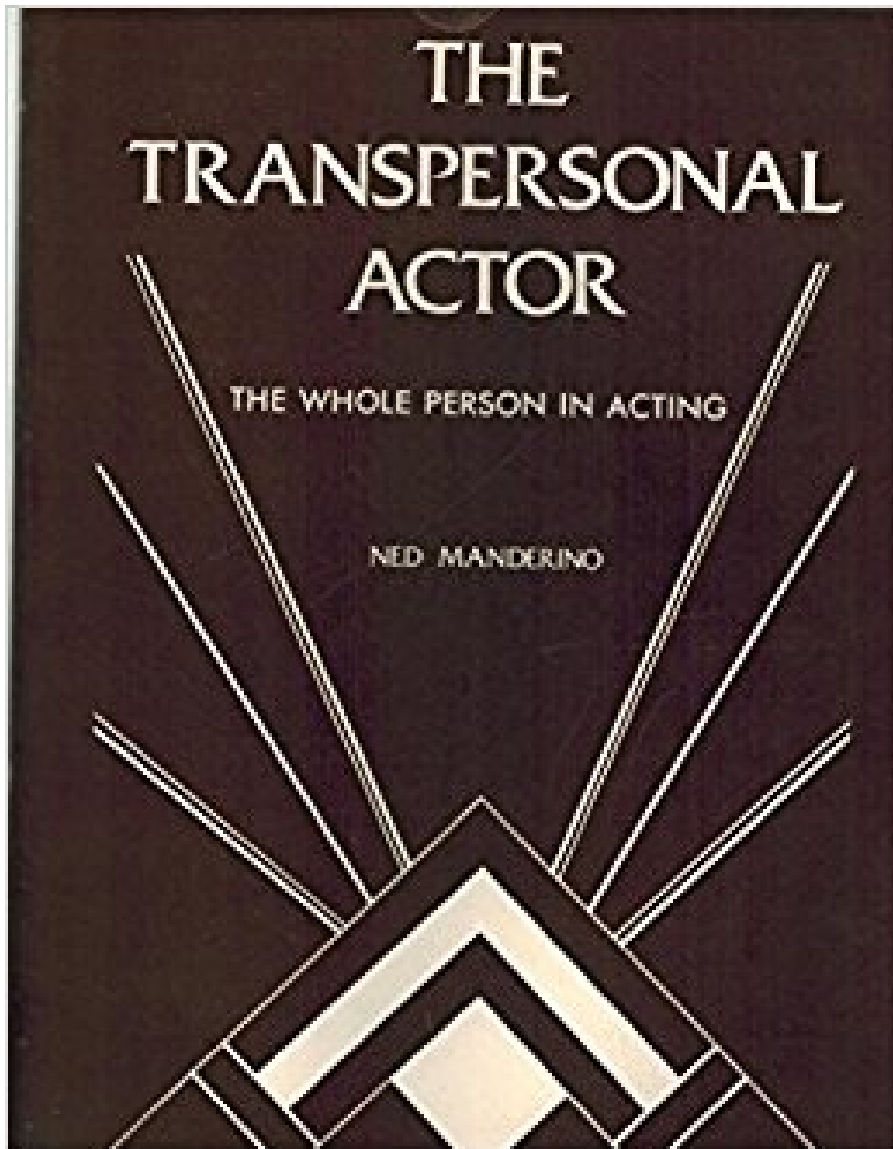


Scene Improv by Ned Manderino

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By corey parker



IMPROVISATION

All perfect accomplishment in art or life is accompanied by the curious sensation that it is happening of itself--that it is not forced, studied, or contrived.

--Alan W. Watts

It is said that modern acting began in the 16th Century when the Com-media dell 'Arte troupes of Italy used improvisation almost exclusively in their theaters. Actors in these troupes were supreme artists who could not only act, but had diverse theatrical abilities and were also required to be acrobats, in addition to being singers, dancers, scenarists, and producers. It is no doubt for these abilities that the 16th Century Italian actors are regarded as the supreme theater artists in theater history.

The Italian impulse for improvisation was present in Eleanora Duse's work and Bertita Harding writes:

At home or abroad, critics unanimously acknowledged Eleanora's gift for improvisation, particularly when the action of the play threatened to go limp. . . . Regarding the famous Duse gift for improvisation, there were complaints from successive stage directors and playwrights, who accused her of taking liberties with scripts. But she knew better. From her standpoint to act was to create; the meaning of a play mattered, even if its text was not rendered letter-perfect. She insisted upon elasticity of dialogue. *

Paul Muni tells how furious he would get during film work when a scene was going perfectly and the director would yell "Cut!" because he left out a few words of the script. We need not mention the problems created for Marilyn Monroe in not being able to deal with the demand of delivering dialog letter-perfect.

Pauline Kael's controversial review of Last Tango in Paris gave support to the burgeoning theory that the actor's ability to improvise, within the context of various situations in a film script, will become highly desirable during future years of film production:

But acting involves the joy of self-discovery, and to improvise, as actors mean it, is the most instinctive, creative part of acting--to bring out and give form to what you didn't know you had in you; it's the surprise, the "magic" in acting.

. . . Bertolucci builds a structure that supports improvisation. Everything is prepared, but everything is subject to change, and the whole film is alive with a sense of discovery. Bertolucci builds the characters "on what the actors are in themselves. I never ask them to interpret something pre-existent, except for dialogue--and even that changes a lot." For Bertolucci, the actors "make the characters." And Brando knows how to improvise: it isn't just Brando improvising, it's Brando improvising as Paul. *

Charles Champlin reviewing the same film said:

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* Pauline Kael, review of "Last Tango in Paris," The New Yorker, October 28, 1972 issue, New York, N.Y. ©1972.

There are two or three extended scenes--Brando suggesting that he ought never to have had a name, another recalling his boyhood and his mother--that feel like improvisations which have gotten out of hand, gone beyond the needs of the exercise and beyond make-believe.

No one, you think, could possibly have written or even outlined them. Whether they are truly autobiographical becomes a matter of gossip; what is important is that they have a clenching sincerity and intensity which seems to leave mere craft far behind. Brando is always impressive on the screen; it is hard for me to remember when he has been so moving.

Whether to use improvisation or not is a continual source of controversy among actors and directors, except for someone like Robert Altman in whose films improvisation is the style which the actors accept with creative eagerness. Some actors feel that they need it and others find no value in it. There are directors who use it in order to free actors from the script so that fresh meanings can be obtained. In employing improvisation, the director attempts to uncover scenic values and often discovers superb ideas for staging and character interactions which he eventually incorporates into his overall plan. What the use of improvisation does for the actor and director is to enable them to probe beneath the words of the script and to deal with psychological undercurrents that can often only be vaguely suggested by the words.

There are numerous types of improvisations. Among people concerned with the craft of acting, new improvisations are constantly being devised in which new ideas and approaches to acting are combined with improvisational forms which have proven effective and valuable.

There is already a wealth of material concerning improvisation which one encounters in books on acting and the theater. A certain comprehensive understanding is, perhaps, needed which can be accomplished by categorizing the reasons, rules, and results of improvisation.

Reasons

1. It enables the actor to undo patterns that have become so fixed in his technique that there is the danger of mechanical processes taking over. Improvisation can offer a verbal actor the opportunity to discover how his undue attention to words prevents him from dealing with concrete inner values.
2. The actor may have exciting ideas about behavior which can be greatly enriched by improvisation, since it will permit him to explore the behavior in a way that strict adherence to the lines can never accomplish.
3. Since the essence of acting is to make it happen at the moment it is supposed to be happening, improvisation is a supreme learning device. In improvisation, the actor is not concerned with lines he has memorized, or bits of business and movement, but has to deal with freshly created patterns of thought. The actor is then rewarded with a feeling of faith in himself and a fuller insight into his own creativeness.

4. The actor can call upon improvisation as a way of solving a problem in the scene for which there has been no solution.
5. After intensive study of a character, there are still facets of the character that can be uncovered. By using the knowledge that one has already formed about the character, the actor should seek character elements in improvisation which may not have been revealed during the period of script study.
6. Elements of atmosphere, relationship, event, and so forth, can be taken separately during improvisations in order to deal with all their intrinsic possibilities.
7. The actor is enabled to find out his own personal relationship to his part, and to the script, when he no longer is obliged to feel that his lines are of paramount necessity.
8. When the actor deals with action, a basic ingredient in improvisation, there is often a sudden release from a rigid vocal quality caused by habits of line emphasis.
9. Forced emotions can be the death of an actor. Improvisation gives the actor a freedom of dealing with his emotions so that he can experience the difference between forced emotions and emotions that are free, because they are created instantaneously.
10. An excellent quality that an actor may possess for a part is often not revealed until an imaginative improvisation uncovers it with revelatory effect.
11. A director can employ an improvisation when it is apparent that there is no ease between two actors in a scene which calls for a profound kind of human relationship. The improvisation enables them to make a deeper contact and a greater attentiveness to what they are saying to each other.
12. If a certain emotional value is required in a scene, improvisations can be devised to enable the actor to experience that emotion at its full strength so that it will occur with greater ease when it has to be created in the scene.

Rules

1. The actor must select some task to do in the improvisation and he should maintain the task throughout the improvisation. It should be a task that forces him to be concrete about what he wants to accomplish.
2. Some actors feel that they can do an improvisation as themselves, because they feel that they are that character. Without this feeling, the actor has to choose characterization elements which will make him the character he is supposed to be.

3. Contact is necessary with your partner. Let there be a communion. You are not saying memorized lines and waiting for your cue. You are listening to and speaking words that are being said for the first time. This helps you to determine, in your acting, if you are really listening to what the other person is saying, instead of already thinking of what your next line will be.
4. Be personal with your partner. Say personal things so that personal reactions and behavior can be permitted to take place. Be prepared to deal with personal things that are said to you and not allow them to throw your concentration, but find a way of incorporating the personal reaction.
5. You cannot improvise for the sake of improvisation; otherwise, the improvisation will be verbal and of no value. Improvisation is not a means to find out how glib you are with words. It is intended to obtain certain results which can only be obtained by being definite about what it is that you wish to accomplish.
6. In setting the action for the improvisation, keep in mind the action of the situation in order that they be related.
7. Often a director, in improvising upon a scene with which the actors may be having difficulty, will create a circumstance that is quite close to the actors' own experience.
8. The element to bear in mind during an improvisation is to find out what will happen. One must be open to all the twists and turns that an improvisation is likely to take.
9. An improvisation will reveal to you what hidden meanings you can find in a scene which are not necessarily those that an author may have had in mind, but can have dramatic relevance.
10. Given circumstances must be determined for an improvisation. They are as important to an improvisation as they are to a scene.
11. Avoid paraphrasing the lines of a scene in order to deal with the reality of a scene which is not in the words, but in the basic situation.
12. In setting a problem to be accomplished, be aware of not setting a problem that will not demand much of the imagination.
13. Just as a scene can have various actions, so can an improvisation. Changes of action will give the improvisation dynamic structure and movement.

Results

1. The actor has less tendency to rush towards lines and deals with the behavior required for the moments in the scene.

2. Having improvised a scene, the actor retains a sense of improvisation even in performance. This results in spontaneity which is a highly desirable thing for the actor to have.
3. In working with just the words of a scene, the tasks and problems are sometimes concealed, and only when an improvisation is used can an actor perceive the precise elements on which he has to work in order to accomplish the scene's purpose. In a scene, you already know from the author's text what the end of the scene will be; in an improvisation, you get a sense of permitting yourself to go anywhere without any preset conclusion.
4. It is a way to get a group of actors, whose acting approaches are divergent, to immediately work in unison. Some actors will want to work only for actions; others will work sensorily; some may want to combine these two approaches. All, in some way of the other, will usually be open-minded about the possible value to be gained from the use of improvisation.
5. One must be careful that the ease with which he works during an improvisation is transposed into the scene; otherwise, the improvisation will have been for little purpose.
6. Thoughts, feelings and emotions will happen with a greater degree of fullness because of the magical way which problems can be solved in any of these areas through the use of improvisation. Over and over again, I have seen how a scene has been tremendously improved by working on it improvisationally.
7. Improvisations break routine work. Just as a weekend in the country or at the beach can remove set patterns of working, which can at times be mechanical, so can an improvisation give one a sense of being less doggedly faithful to words and situations that have gone stale.
8. In the beginning stages of improvisation work, particularly the first six or seven improvisations that the actor does using the early Boleslavsky exercises for tasks, the actor should refrain from moving his arms and hands in order to avoid being verbal with them. The early improvisation work, it must be emphasized, is not scene work and therefore the actor is not obliged to fulfill scenic requirements such as gestures and movement. In classroom improvisations, if you use tasks such as sunshine or overall experiences, it can be beneficial not to remain in the chair for the entire improvisation. At some moment, stand so that you can have those sensations make more contact with the body than perhaps you can by remaining in your chair. If your tasks, in the beginning stages, are personal objects or wandering personal objects, let them create meaningful movements with the hands and arms. As you progress deeper into the exercise work, you will have a wide range of tasks to create organic, and not verbal, expression on the entire body.
9. Acting with others is a matter of rapport. Improvisation develops the ability to be responsive. Improvisation is the golden path to ensemble acting--a goal so much sought after, but only in rare instances achieved.

Improvisations in the Workshop

Over the years, I have composed hundreds of improvisational situations, usually involving two people, but sometimes three. The value of doing improvisations is that the actor is immediately able to use a sensory or Transpersonal exercise that he has done at the beginning of the class. In this manner, he need not wait until he has scene work in order to create behavior in a situation. My list of improvisations cover a vast range of topics and are indexed so that I can quickly select improvisational situations that allow the student to immediately use the result of his exercise work. Otherwise, he may have to wait weeks to use it in a scene. The daily newspaper is the best source for the teacher who wishes to gather improvisational situations. Book reviews are particularly good, since the student will have the unique opportunity of creating an interesting and novel character long before the book is dramatized into a play or film script.

I usually have three or four groups working simultaneously during the improvisation period of the class. Chairs are distributed on the stage area and the improvisation is begun in the sitting position, usually. Improvisational partners are paired together and the improvisational period occurs as each group, taking turns, creates the situation assigned them. This can save a lot of class time.

The actor selects the action he will use during the improvisation and also the task. He then relaxes and begins to prepare his task. When the teacher sees that the groups have prepared their tasks, then the first group begins their improvisation. The improvisation time for each group should be about five minutes. Sometimes it is beneficial to have a second round for each group, because the action and task may not have worked properly the first time. As each group waits for their turn, they should keep the tasks going. Tasks should not be dropped until the improvisation is completed. In other words, when one group is doing its improvisation, the other groups are absorbed in creating their tasks.

THE TRANSPERSONAL ACTOR

THE WHOLE PERSON IN ACTING

NED MANDERINO

