TENTH ANNIVERSARY YEAR

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THE CRAFT by Jean Schiffman

By the Book
L.A. teacher Stephen Book’s improvisation technique challenges accepted Method acting assumptions.

I don’t know if I’d want to call Los Angeles teacher Stephen Book’s approach to acting revolutionary, but, in adapting Stanislavski’s original technique for script work, he challenges some of the received wisdom of modern American training and offers a practical method to infuse your performance with spontaneity.

For example, actions and objectives are among the many tools available to play a scene—but, for Book, not necessarily in the way you traditionally think of them. As he describes it, his exercises sound suspiciously like playing for result, playing attitude, and working from the inside out—until you understand the context of his carefully organized system.

Book first learned improvisation skills from famed improv guru Viola Spolin, and his professional relationship with her scripts from the writers’ point of view and make choices. He recently published Book on Book: Improvisation Technique for the Professional Actor in Film, Theater & Television (Silman-James Press). Book’s output has grown in direct correlation to his years of experience.

Like most contemporary teachers, Book believes that “acting is doing,” but he adds, “and there’s always more to do.” What does he mean by this? “In the old days, when [acting is doing] came into being, it referred to playing an action,” he explained. “I’ve expanded it so it’s not just that.” For him, doing means checking out the possibilities, being a server as an actor—and also serves the script—in the moment. The various tools help you engage in conflict, create a character, and discover a whole new way of thinking, which can be switched on and off, and much more. “There’s always more to do” is Book’s way of emphasizing that, “the minute you think you’re not more to do, you set your performance…and that’s the beginning of the end. That’s where the first 15 minutes of the show is where you do that.”

Improvisation Technique puts the doing in the body, not in the ‘problem-solving’ head,” he writes, and he provides exercises that he calls “symptomatography” and other commonly taught forms of bodily expression.

Does Book’s method work? Michael Ness, a Los Angeles Shakespearean actor who studied with Book several years ago, says that he used it for the first time in a “very serious” online, thinks so. He has been studying with Book for three and a half years, and he told me that, despite graduating from the University of California-Los Angeles drama school, the tools that used Uta Hagen’s techniques, he never felt he had a reli-

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On Being in the Moment

“Being in the moment is not the end, it’s the beginning.” Lots of people can train and do exercises and be in the moment and go with the flow, but they are in fact, in doing that, interpreting and exploiting—and I use that word in a very specific way. The acting can be so open and vivid that could make someone think the actor intended the script to do at that moment. Or are they reducing the script to a playground for them to be in the moment?

On Playing Emotions

Book writes: “Emotion work is a substantial part of Improvisation Technique, but from a while new approach. I would choose to phrase it this way: I want my students to practice their moment’s notion without dwelling on subjective history or affective memories. Once you know how to physicalize an emotion (exercises in the book show you how to choose an emotion and feel it in different parts of your body...) you simply select a prepared emotion based on the script, and you know how to pursue a part of the body, and you’re there. And

Stephen Book

if you’re not doing a preplanned choice, you have a body so tuned up that it’s completely open to the arrival of some spontaneous emotion.

“There are very few classes that train actors in what to do with the emotion after it arrives—how to ‘arc’ 23 basic emotions, let’s say. The traveling of a different character through any one, intensity is an emotional scale. … The proficient actor not only selects any opportunity presented in the script to climb the arc, but also has the skill to initiate his own movement up the arc.

Or how to do emotion switches: If a character is in a scene for more than one beat, that character goes through emotional changes, or should. Changing from one feeling to another may be improvised or preplanned and is easily accomplished through an emotion switch.

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