



Big breakthrough.

# You Say You Want a Revelation

Having a breakthrough in acting class is a moment you'll never forget—and never expect.

by Laura Weinert

**M**arilyn Fox tells a story about a young student of hers who in all visible respects lacked talent.

"He was the really beautiful kid who hung around class but was never fully committed, who nobody had much respect for," she said. The class began working on a performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and gave the actor the part of the Lion, the part with the fewest lines to botch. When the actor playing Thisbe got a TV job, this actor was the only other one who was attractive enough to play Thisbe, who plays a girl in the play within the play. So they gave it to him without wanting to, and the actor had to go on. "He put on this little ballet skirt," she recalled, "and some kind of bow in his hair. And suddenly, with this costume on, he entered the stage... and he took this leap. I mean he literally jumped through the air. I really felt like Annie Sullivan when Helen Keller says, 'Waawaa.' It was really like he became an actor in that leap. He suddenly knew. I remember I was crying because I couldn't believe that he suddenly knew what it was to express himself that way.... He's since become a wonderful actor."

Breakthroughs are something you hear seasoned actors talk about with a kind of mystical nostalgia. It's a little bit like talking to people who have had out-of-body experiences. They remember "that day," "that moment," "that scene" when acting suddenly made sense to them on an intuitive level, when something large and previously out of their reach became theirs to use for life. In a way, that breakthrough was the moment

at which they became an actor in the deepest sense. Unlike the many small discoveries actors make as they train, breakthroughs are, by definition, dramatic.

"These are once-in-a-lifetime things," said acting teacher John Ruskin. "They can change a life overnight. I've seen people completely alter their beings. They do an exercise that takes them to a place they've never dreamed of, and it opens up their entire psyche. To be a part of that experience is the greatest. In some ways, that's what we're always shooting for."

Most breakthroughs, however, tend to happen when actors are least expecting it, when they're doubting themselves, doubting the entire process of training itself. "I think that if somebody's working very, very

hard to try to grow as an actor," said Fox, "usually what happens to them is, they get right up against a point where something really is going to shift, and then they get extremely depressed because they've been working so hard and start to feel like it's never going to happen. And suddenly, when they feel the most depressed and are really about to give up, that's when it happens, because I think it's then when people relax—when their hope is gone."

"It's like Zen," said acting teacher Stephen Book. "Cease striving and there will be transformation."

## Guiding Discovery

Aside from waiting for a gift from the gods, however, there are ways, through technique and training, to make break-

throughs more likely to occur. There are different kinds of breakthroughs, as well—different types of obstacles that actors habitually come up against and have difficulty surmounting.

Book divides breakthroughs into two categories: the spontaneous discovery an actor makes without knowing there was a problem to begin with, and the other kind of breakthrough, "when an actor achieves something in an area where there had been known limitations." These are the areas teachers and students can perhaps more readily work on—whether it's the ability to arc an emotion to its peak, or whether it's the ability to stay on a preselected focus for the length of the exercise or scene. "Other kinds of breakthroughs

are in the area of spontaneity," said Book. "You may see an actor who is very much in his head, who plots and plans and schemes and judges, and then all of a sudden they're doing an improv or an exercise and you see that fly out the window."

So how does an acting teacher guide an actor to such a seemingly unpredictable revelation? "The way you do it is by continuously addressing the area of the problem through exercises with no emphasis on desiring the breakthrough," said Book. Book gave the example of the actor who is emotionally blocked in a certain area, who comes to surmount that blockage through general exercises in that same area. "Here's a common problem with a percentage of young actors: They have problems with anger," said Book. "They

have a hard time being furious in a scene. They can get to being annoyed. They can get to being irritated, with occasional breakthroughs into anger, but fury? Forget it."

"So instead of telling an actor, 'You've got to be able to do fury if you're going to be a professional actor, and get out there and give me fury,' instead of doing that, which almost guarantees failure, you address the strengthening of the emotional muscle in the realm of anger. You do anger exercises with no onus on getting to fury. And then slowly, it's the coach's job to sneak in the exercise—without telling the actor what he's doing—that might bring the actor to fury."

Fox offered a similar example in the area of the physical breakthrough, in which an actor who has difficulty expressing himself physically can be coached gently toward a kind of revelation in that specific area. "Sometimes through a series of

scenes, an actor will work on and habitually run into one kind of blockage, and then they will be ready to take a small adjustment, a physical adjustment, to do something crazy—to play the scene like an ape, or to play the scene like they're made out of glass, or to play the scene like they're having a tantrum. Then sometimes, physically, an actor will have a complete change in their ability to express themselves. Once that happens, no matter how far back the actor goes, the actor is changed."

Another technique is to work around the problem area, to build confidence until the actor is ready to address the limitation. "I think some people can become free through the body," said Fox. "I think

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other people are more cerebral, and when they understand, they can become free. There are other people who understand on an emotional level, and that's what helps them to get free. The best actor is communicating from all three. Usually what I try to do is, if I see an actor who is bound up physically and more emotionally open, I try to help them to release the bound-up physical thing by building strength where strength lies. If you strengthen the part of them that they're comfortable in, they'll be more apt to be relaxing in the areas that they're not, and more able to risk, because if a student has success in one area, they feel more confident trying to move into an area that they're not comfortable in."

For a major discovery to take place, feeling comfortable to try new things is essential. "The most important thing," said Ruskin, "is for the class environment to truly feel supportive, warm, nurturing—safe in an artistic way. They need to know that they will not be lambasted or criticized but they will be supported in their risks." Establishing a long-term relationship with a teacher you trust can help to provide that safety zone.

"If I just walk into a scene-study room," said Ruskin, "there's very little chance that I'm going to open up. Acting is about how far you're willing to reveal yourself, and that depends on how long and how deep and how much trust there is. It takes time. If you spend years getting to know someone, then you feel like risking, as opposed to a surface relationship with a teacher who doesn't really know you and your fears and strengths."

While there are teachers who can force actors toward breakthroughs through psychologically brutal means, most teachers agree that this isn't necessary and can often do more harm than good. The archetypal teacher who barks criticisms and sends frustrated actors out of the room is perhaps a thing of the past.

"I don't believe in doing that since people like that, all they ever did was hurt me and damage me," said Fox. "The only thing those teachers have got going for them is that they make you live for the moment where you can say, 'Fuck you, I told you. You were wrong about me.' I think people are hard enough on themselves. If they're serious actors, they are. They don't need me to beat up on them."

## To Thine Own Self...

One of the most difficult and most important kinds of breakthroughs is in the area of authenticity. Often there's a kind of lie in the actor's performance, and to move past this, actors have to get out of the habit of lying, of covering up parts of themselves, of trying to be a "good actor." They have to "take off the armor," as Ruskin phrases it, and become willing to reveal their true artistic self for an authenticity breakthrough to occur.

"Most people are afraid to be seen," said Ruskin, whose technique is based strictly on the teachings of Sanford Meisner. "They really believe that if they're seen truly, there's something in there that won't be worthy of being loved, something that will be ugly, something that people will walk away from. Most actors on the stage, not wanting to do that, will keep the sides up and try to act pretty and cute. Nobody's interested in that. We want to see them raw."

Ruskin explained that this process of stripping away superficial layers can be difficult because of the defenses people have developed throughout their lives. "They're always told as children, 'Don't be afraid. Don't be angry.' We have to tell them the opposite. Come in here and get really, really angry if you're angry, come in here and cry your eyes out if you're sad. Come in here and dance like a monkey if you're happy. It's who we are originally, so, ironically, the human being wants to go to that place. It's where we live. Everything else is a façade; it's a lie. But somewhere in that being, they can start listening to the older truth, the wiser self."

Acting teacher Silvana Gallardo described a similar process. "Most actors have a mask on," said Gallardo. "What we do is try to remove the mask, remove the protective coverings that they use in their real lives, so that they can go back to the beginning."

All actors, however, might not show up to class ready for the kind of self-exploration that might be asked of them. In the case of actors who have severe blocks, who might not be ready for the kind of soul-searching that goes on in acting classes, a good therapist might be the first step.

"Acting is a spiritual journey," said Ruskin. "But you do need to have the ground prepared. It has to be fertile. When someone's been through trauma, and they've closed up a part of themselves, and part of their emotional being has been so guarded, oppressed, and destroyed, that's tough. That's where some psychological training—or deeper spiritual training, meditation training, yoga—would be important."

Indeed, while many acting teachers might try to remedy these kinds of blocks in class, actors should be wary of any acting teacher who gets too personal, who crosses that thin line between setting up exercises in which an actor can safely explore himself or herself, and probing intrusively into an actor's personal life.

"The moment an acting teacher starts to play therapist is the moment an actor should leave that class immediately," said Book. "Quit. Get out of there. Therapy is a medical discipline. What does an acting teacher know about that? Who the hell trained them to know how to go in and deal with that? It's terribly dangerous. It's the first sign of an acting teacher who doesn't know what he's doing."

Acting is an extremely personal art, however, and actors can expect to make use of their personal lives within specific contexts. "If an actress is having difficulty playing intimacy with another character," explained Book, "I don't think the acting teacher has crossed the line if they say, 'Well, play the scene as if you're playing it with your real boyfriend.' But if they get into questions and answers about the actor's personal life, talking about their parents, or when they first felt feelings of inadequacy, things that are clearly of a psychological nature... they're mucking around in an area that requires skill, and they haven't been trained in that."

## Only the First Step

If an actor is fortunate enough to have a breakthrough, the teacher's job then becomes to try to cement it, to encourage the actor to savor the moment so that it doesn't wash over him or her unacknowledged. "It's like with the old film where you used to have to put the coat on it to seal it," said Ruskin. "You have to validate it, you support it, you let them know what a profound event that it is in life."

Fox disagreed slightly. "There are certain people for whom it's better not to say anything, not to call attention to it because if you do, it will abash them in some kind of way, and they need it to be very private and it just needs to be accepted. There are other people where you can say to them—and I usually do it privately—'You've had this experience. No one can ever take it away from you. Always know that you did that.'"

"When actors have breakthroughs," added Fox, "it doesn't matter who saw it. They saw it. They were totally expressing themselves, and it was beautiful, and it touched me, and it was everything that matters in the world about being human. It was everything that dignifies acting as something more than a narcissistic thing to make money. It doesn't matter if some agent doesn't want you. You have your soul and you have something beautiful inside and you expressed it and you shared it in a generous way, and it was a gift from God that you felt it and I got to see it."

But once the savoring is over, actors should be ready to continue to build on what they accomplished, no matter how suddenly it came about—lest it be lost forever. "If it remains simply a breakthrough, it's of minimal value," said Book. "The secret is transforming a breakthrough into technique by continually addressing that muscle." In some ways, Book explained, it's like learning to ride a bike. When the training wheels come off and you realize you can go shooting down the street on your own, the key is to try it again as soon as possible. "Get back on the bike and ride, ride, ride until it's second nature," said Book. "Then the body has learned it, and has it for life." **BS**