

THE
WARNER
LOUGHLIN
TECHNIQUE

AN ACTING REVOLUTION

“There are those whose lives affect all others around them. Quietly touching one heart. Who in turn, touches another, reaching out to ends further than they would ever know.”

~WILLIAM BRADFIELD

MYTH OF THE TORTURED ACTOR

Where is it written that in order to be a gifted actor, you must be filled with rage or pain or strife? Who says you must be brooding and difficult; that as an actor you must view the world differently than everyone else? I can tell you that ideas like these have been written or implied in far too many acting books. This misconception is taught and even *encouraged* in a great percentage of acting classes around the world.

How many classes have you taken in which the primary goal of the teacher was to make you cry? Chances are it was also suggested that if you couldn't achieve hysterics, you were somehow not quite as talented as the next actor. I can tell you that it's more than possible for me to walk out onto the street right now, grab a passing stranger, spend a few minutes with him and make him cry. Does that make him an actor? I think not. I would hope not!

How many teachers have *insisted* that you must have been wronged by your parents, siblings, best friends, or lovers? How many have asked you to expose yourself emotionally and physically – with an inane exercise that sacrificed your privacy – for all your classmates to see? How many of them initially made you feel like you could conquer the world, only later to make you feel undeserving, idiotic and talent-

less! Ego is the great killer of creativity. If your teacher's ego is bigger than the state of Texas ... good Lord, leave. Your class should be about YOU, not the teacher. You must learn to be a self-sufficient actor able to create characters in your own right. Characters that are beautifully unique to you and only you.

This technique teaches you to effortlessly access and actually experience the specific and unique emotions of the character. With it, you'll find the joy and freedom to be the character in the moment, and you'll discover the limitless possibilities in creating a character as only *you* can.

You will let go of the need to nail an emotion; rid yourself of superficially executing beats and actions; drop the reliance on "super objectives," "objectives" and "intentions" and forget the constant checking of your work to see if you are hitting moments in the way that you want to. All of this puts you "in your head." I call it "third-eyeing" a performance, meaning you're actually trying to watch your own work as you do it. And you'll find it makes you completely self-conscious. You'll think about how a line is going to sound when you say it, or what you look like doing an action. When you do these things, you are not acting. You are simply watching yourself. You should be joyously free when you're acting, not judging whether or not you are believable in the moment.

The whole idea is to *walk* as the character walks; to *talk* as the character talks; to *think*, *breathe* and *react* as he or she reacts. So much so that there will be moments when you're utterly surprised by how you feel and stunned that an emotion popped up that you weren't expecting. What a kick that is!

You can apply this technique to any character in the dramatic realm, be it TV, film or stage. TV comedy, and to a degree, film comedy, is a different, albeit beautiful, beast. Some of the principles here can certainly be applied to comedy. But to truly master the art of comedy, I would encourage you to refer to the Warner Loughlin Technique for Comedy.

The technique in this book will allow you to have a uniquely powerful presence when you're on camera and an exuberant, full life when you are not. *Go. Be. Brilliant.*

“Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things you didn’t do than by the ones you did do. So throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbor. Catch the trade winds in your sails.

Explore. Dream. Discover.”

~ MARK TWAIN

THE PATH YOU CHOOSE IS THE JOURNEY YOU TAKE

Along with countless other actors, I was taught that the only true way to experience authentic dramatic sizzle in my characters is through recalling personal angst or tragedy from my past. “Substitution” is the acting term used for this. To briefly explain, the actor substitutes a personal past memory and emotion for the character’s emotion in the scene. Every theater actor I knew in my younger years used this method. I bought it. It made sense. At that time. Sure, I could get to those ugly, painful memories. But only sometimes on some nights. Mostly I just didn’t want to feel that tragedy all over again. But alas, it was for art, and nothing was going to stop me from acting. Not even if it killed me. And it was ... slowly.

I most certainly recommend dealing with your own personal demons, your own pain, under the appropriate circumstances, because healing those hurts will free you to be a better actor. But don’t use the set as a place to do it. It’s a bit selfish, and it can produce a creative stop. (When the pain of the past is so prevalent, we may choose to feel nothing instead. We literally choose to stop feeling. Because to feel something would open the floodgates of emotion and diminish our sense of control.) I know that some actors claim that reliving a past tragedy is like therapy. For some it might be, and for others it’s defi-

nately not. Either way it's not as cathartic as some people might think. Acting isn't therapy. It's an art form.

When you use a substitution, you'll definitely feel something on occasion. But you'll also find it will be fleeting and unreliable. Not the sort of words you want to use in connection with your craft or your career. With a substitution, you're essentially revisiting an experience that you have already lived. Then, on the second take, you're revisiting the re-visitation. In much the same way that a recording of a recording of a recording starts to sound less and less like the original, in using a particular event from my past over and over again, I found it wouldn't affect me with the same power as it did the first time. Which is really terrifying when you absolutely *have* to do an emotional scene on camera. What happens with that repetition is that you desensitize yourself to the pain. Your mind tells you to avoid it. That's human nature. It's our survival mechanism kicking in.

Overall, you can count on one of two things happening when you repeatedly relive a tragedy in your life: either you relive it so much that you don't feel it anymore (so how is that good for your work?), or you incite more of it. Intentionally bringing forth a memory with the express goal of feeling pain *is asking that pain to be present again in your life*. How is that good for your life or your career? There actually was a point when I was desperately looking for pain in my life, hoping for pain, so that I could use it in my work. I learned the hard way that when you ask for it, you certainly get it.

As children, we only touch a hot stove once! We learn that it's painful and avoid it at all costs. But actors who use a substitution "touch that hot stove" over and over again. Think about what that requires. You touched it and it burned. Now in choosing to touch it again, there will be a bit of anticipation, hesitation and resistance, don't you think? But you do it anyway, and yes, it still hurts, but somehow, it's less painful now, because you knew what was coming. When you're in the middle of a scene, the last thing you want is anticipation, hesitation and resistance to an emotion, which eventually leads you to beating yourself up for not being able to "get there." As actors, we're often quite good at beating ourselves up. Maybe it's time to stop that.

Stay true to human nature. Sane human beings don't go around

seeking pain and torment! Why should actors? If your mission as an actor is to create authentic human behavior, why in the world would you seek to work against natural human instincts?

Most colleges and acting studios have for generations been teaching techniques that deal with some form of substituting your own life experiences. Were they all wrong, you ask? I wouldn't say they were all wrong. I am saying that what they came up with was the best they could do at the time. Most of these techniques were based upon a convoluted form of Stanislavski – a reinterpretation of his system. Most people would agree that Stanislavski was a bit of a genius when it came to acting in the theater. That's my point. Only theater existed when his technique was conceived. It was all they knew. So it suited the theater, the medium in which they worked. While the mediums have changed drastically with the advent of TV and film, the teaching of the craft has been slow to catch up. Most schools or studios, even here in LA, still teach only these methods that were invented specifically for theatre. The technique you are about to master, while designed to create beautifully nuanced, magical and unique characters in television and film, still works magnificently on stage, where you will experience the joy of new discovery throughout the run of the play.

But working in TV and film requires something very different from theater. No longer are you experiencing emotions once per night as you do in a play. On set you must repeat an emotion, take after take. No longer are you performing a piece with a structured beginning, middle and end. For the most part, every scene is shot out of sequence. It's kind of like jumping rope backwards under water while chewing gum. Discombobulating at best.

My early training was all about theater. Substitution was the only technique that I had been taught. There was one event that I would eventually draw upon several times when I needed the devastation to be present in my character. It happened in college.

I had fallen in love with a wonderful man. Jimmy was a year older and had just graduated that May but would be staying in Chapel Hill for most of the summer. Eventually the day came when Jimmy had to leave and begin what looked to be a very promising career. But first he was traveling to California to visit a dear friend for a week or so.

He packed up his little beat-up orange Volkswagen. At well over six feet, he looked hilarious in that car. We cried and hugged. It was sad, but he was also excited for what the future would hold. We promised to write or talk every day. Pre cell phone days, that was difficult. As Jimmy was a man of his word, sure enough, I received a letter almost daily.

Late one morning, having fallen asleep on the couch while cramming for an exam, I was roused from my exhaustion and half-sleep by crying and whispers. I opened my eyes to find my friends all around me. In the wee hours of the morning, Jimmy had been senselessly struck in a head-on collision by a drunk driver on the Pacific Coast Highway in Malibu, California. He was dead.

It took years for that wound to heal and even longer before I could consider drawing upon it for my work. But my training had taught me that this was the sort of experience that would be ideal to use for a substitution. Whenever I needed to bring up tears, rage, or debilitating grief, I would recall the moment I heard of Jimmy's death. Sometimes, yes, I would cry. But mostly, *I just didn't want to go there!* We aren't meant, as human beings, to keep re-experiencing tragedies; we're meant to heal from them. But again, this was for art. This was for my craft that I so dearly loved.

So here I was in LA. It was my first TV job, and I had a 6:00 AM make-up call. I was determined to be brilliant. I was going to the "Jimmy place" no matter how painful it might be. I was happy that the emotional, "learning-my-husband-had-been-killed" scene was to be shot in the morning. It would be good to get that part of the day over with. (Read: *utter dread!*) In the make-up chair, I tried my best to dredge up painful memories of Jimmy's loss. By the time we were ready to shoot, I was *there*, back in the gnarling pain I'd spent so much time trying to heal, full of emotion, ready to explode. The master shot was, well, masterful. The second time we shot the master, the emotion lessened a little, but it was still powerful. (Note also, at that time, I was so inexperienced that I didn't realize that a master shot is usually very wide and not where you want to let the depth of all your emotions explode; you want to save a little of that emotion for your coverage, or close-ups.) My coverage was second, so I was still able to dribble up a bit of emotion when camera rolled. I was thrilled.

We broke for lunch, and I felt like a success. What a relief! I had managed to access that horrible grief. Okay, not on every take, but at least I had mostly gotten there. There were plenty of auditions in which the emotion eluded me no matter how hard I tried to vomit up the pain. This was a clear WIN! So I thought ...

The next shot after lunch was the “happiest-day-of-my-life-thrilled-to-be-with-my-love” scene. Take one ... take two ... take three ... The director yelled cut. He had an odd look on his face as he walked up to me. Uh-oh. He took me aside (very embarrassing) and said, “Do you realize you are carrying the tragedy of the scene we shot this morning into the happy scene we’re doing now?”

I was stumped. “Nooooo.” I had not realized it.

“It’s like you have a little black rain cloud over your head. You’re supposed to be *haaaappy in this scene!* Get it?!”

I tried to make adjustments to please the director, but no matter what I did, I could *not* shake a part of that sadness. The grief of losing Jimmy was too present. It was still there, it was absolutely real, and it was *mine*. I learned that day that dropping in and out of my own experiences is a far more difficult thing than dropping in and out of the life of a character.

I don’t think the director was ever quite happy with the scene. I certainly wasn’t. The crying in the first scene looked a little forced; there was something missing in it. I could actually tell that I was someplace else. In order to use a substitution, you *must* be someplace else: your own life. A substitution requires the impossible – being in two places at the same time. You must momentarily drop out of the character and into your own past. The falseness of it is readable on screen. You can’t think a character thought and a personal thought at the same time. Seeing that performance in context, it felt selfish. It felt – forgive the term – very masturbatory. It was uncomfortable to watch.

But how else could you possibly bring up an organic and true emotion in the moment if you didn’t use a substitution? How do you play, say, a victim of abuse if you have never been abused in your real life? Even with an understanding of how that character feels, how do you play it without using some sort of false substitution?

Being a good actor means being able to access the emotion when you need it. But the *way* in which you access it and the ability to control it are vitally important to your being a stable, competent, professional actor and a healthy human being. Each of us has a finite set of life experiences. When we draw solely upon our personal experiences, we are drawing from a limited or *finite* well. When we tap into our imaginations, on the other hand, we can draw from an *infinite*, abundant and free flowing well.

So if old schools of thought ask you to REENACT or RECREATE the character using your limited and finite set of experiences, I am asking you to CREATE the character using the infinite well of imagination. Therein lies the difference. You are CREATING! Let's go conquer it!