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Imaginary Circumstances, Real Life

Was I learning about myself or about acting in all those classes? Both.

by Rachel Zients

The Neighborhood Playhouse, the very prestigious, Sanford Meisner-based theatre conservatory of New York City, my very own alma mater, was amazingly enough listed a few years back in *Time Out* magazine as one of the best places in New York to get naked. Now I, proud to say, never got naked in class—though, to my utter shame, I cannot say that I never got naked with anyone from my class.

I take that as an indicator—a rather loud, published, and personal experienced indicator—that there is a lot more going on in acting class than acting.

The pressures to outshine one another, to prove our extreme comfort with "public solitude," to get invited back, surfaced in many ways, the most obvious of which was disrobing. I've never been one for obvious, and I've also never been one for public back nakedness. Some would say I was too self-conscious to be an actress. I would say they were stupid. As if I can't bare my soul unless I get bare.

The only other thing that matched the feelings of "divine expression" within the confines of that class experience was our libidos (possibly the two were connected). Granted, we were young and attractive (students in a conservatory, after all, with ballet and jazz all the days of the week and enough exhaustive crying to keep us thin and fit), but there was something else going on besides hormones. There was a dynamic as actors that we brought to the room and to our experience—an experience that is possibly played out over and over again on movie sets between co-stars, of intense emotions, high pressures, excusable misbehavior, and romances born out of a love for the material you are sharing.

Acting class is like wandering the streets of Paris: There are certain romantic expectations. One simply cannot be impressed by a job well done; one must be as vibrant as the one next to us. One must fall in love—with a fellow student or with the teacher. (We did not realize then that it could be with the work.) I've seen both. I've done both, though my love for my teacher was one-sided.

For others I knew, it wasn't. One student/teacher coupling I did not find out about until a year after it had begun. They had even managed to go to Europe on Christmas break together. We never knew. A teacher at another school was dubbed Mrs. Robinson, for she was 10 years older than her pupil.

Our "artistry"—or our capacity to always live in a certain emotional state—served as a tenuous protector from the self-indulgent messes we were creating. What should be celebrated onstage we mistakenly imagined should be a constant.

Release It

When I first committed to studying acting, I thought that I would be studying solely "acting." But what is acting? Sanford Meisner describes it as "living truthfully under imaginary circumstances." Sounds good to me.

But what if you hadn't experienced anything much within your own life, or what if you had but you'd always had to keep a lid on it? Suddenly, daily, we were in the hallway killing our grandmothers in our head, imagining horrid accidents befalling us, losing our way in more ways than one. Whatever we had been hiding or whatever we had been desiring, we were now encouraged to release. And, at least within the school, the action of releasing had no consequences. It was when we went home that we stumbled.

"Speak the truth," I could be heard muttering on the streets of New York, or occasionally I'd demand it at a family function. "You just don't understand" became my daily mantra. I would sulk off in a corner, convinced my family was comprised of morons. Plebeians, I would think, have you no

understanding? Do you not recognize my struggle? Howey will we connect? I didn't realize that our lack of connectic was generating from my end.

Kind of like in the army, they break you to make you, I had to become utterly obnoxious before I found a level of trust my work and myself, and was able to return to my skin.

I learned that in school, too. I remember it quite clearly: I had the truest moment I'd ever had. You know tho. moments, if you're an actor. They are few, they are far between but are such a high that they keep you moving through tl many lows. That moment, I suddenly did not need anyone approval. I knew I had done well. I did not need my teacher approval. I told him so. He was impressed—that was the ne level.

It was interesting and difficult to no longer look to a rever guide. Lionization of our teachers or of the style we we; studying was common. Meisner, Strasberg, Adler—who z originate from Stanislavski, anyway—these names spark competition among young actors. They become your identit We, though we would never admit it, look down on or at lea question other styles. It's almost like, My acting guru can be; up your acting guru.

I would scribble furiously in my journal, convinced I ha never before heard such wisdom, such cleverness, such clarit And what we were learning, even if it had nothing to do wit acting (though it did), was grand.

"Lead with your tits," my teacher would yell. "You can't be lady and be an actress." "Make mistakes you have to wipe o the wall." "Don't stand there content i your sloppy blue jeans," quoting Ut Hagen.

Lionization of our teachers or of the style we were studying was common. Meisner, Strasberg, Adler—who all originate from Stanislavski, anyway—these names spark a competition among young actors. It's almost like, My acting guru can beat up your acting guru.

What other profession or schoolin encourages such messiness? The tric is to apply it to your work while yo protect your life from such extreme; but in class that is not always clear. Th desire to please, the hope that your life long passion will not be ignored, th overwhelming possibilities of fame, fo tune, and artistic purity can lead yo down a dramatic path full of fear.

We'd cry, not because we were goo actors in touch with our instrumen and the situation we were pretending; to be in but because we were good stu dents aware of the very real judgment we were bearing down on ourselve. each time we took to the stage.

And as Mel Brooks' 2,000-year-ol man says, "Everything stems fro fear." Fear is a great motivator, but no when that's all there is. It is our jobs to take a step back, to trust what we have learned, to no longer need the cushior that everyone else around us under stands.

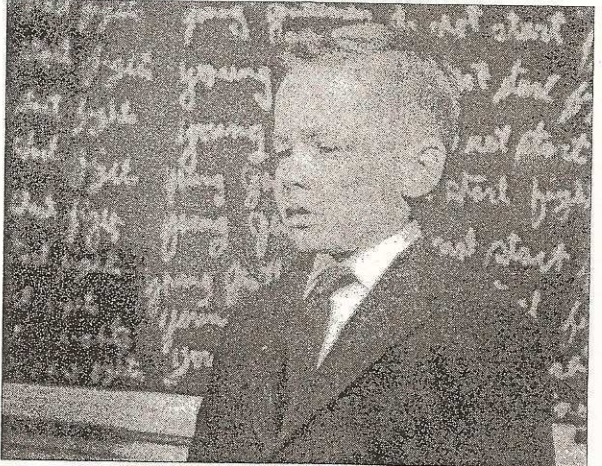
A New Groove

It was with that trust and confidence, facing fear down the barrel of the gun, that I moved to L.A. But class was differ ent in L.A. Headshots and industry referrals were required accoutrements for simple interviews or audits. The brazenness with which people at the Playhouse had worn their emotional nakedness and their success with public solitude was now replaced with loud, boisterous tales of professional grandeur.

"I have to do my scene first because I have an agent meeting tomorrow." "This casting director told me I should work on being soft—any suggestions?"

Adler or Strasberg was now replaced by APA or Gersh. A level of competitive psych-out out was now prevalent, as opposed to the competitive "sibling rivalry" I had once experienced.

So I hopped from class to class trying to find my balance. Some places I stayed awhile, others I moved on from quickly. In a few years I ran the gamut, from Shakespearean studies (which I enjoyed, except for the constant reminder that I did not go to Juilliard and that no one in L.A. would come to see us perform), to disciples of famous disciples who enjoyed lis-



School of hard knocks.

tening to themselves teach, to the spontaneous fun of the Groundlings.

Either I was done being a student, or the structure of being a student was different out here. I know there are things to learn, to practice in regard to this profession, but somewhere in the application, the purity of the art was stained—which is OK, because the application is why we're here. I had just forgotten that.

I did find my student groove again, with both the work and the people, possibly now because I knew what worked for me, though it took awhile. Again, Meisner was the vocabulary we shared (a shared vocabulary is a comfort and a crutch; on sets you will not have this luxury). And like the business we are in, it was complicated. Finally, my work was blossoming, my spirits were calming. I do not know if it was just the end of my settling-in process in L.A. or just the right match. It did not matter. Whichever it was, they were each helping the other.

And then, with something I could not control, I marveled at the predicament I was facing.

Testing and Trusting

After a rather good class of opening up, personal monologue, etc., etc., a fellow student gave me a compliment. The compliments continued through the weeks until demands for dinner filled my answering machine, until, without ever speaking to me outside of the class environment, this ardent admirer delivered proclamations of love. "Nice" was no longer an option. I told him, "You do not know me. You cannot love me."

Now I realize it was a displacement of feeling, like the way fans fall in love with people they see on the screen; they are so impressed with the truth buttons the artist has pressed that they turn those feelings into something they can express. Admiration becomes affection. It is a bit odd to have it right in front of you, and it was different from all that dating that was going on years earlier in class. That was out of a need for comfort with people in similar circumstances.

Given that class is our salvation from the messiness we encounter while employed in this profession, and as I could no longer "speak the truth" in that environment, and as I was not bound there by contract, I left.

Earlier this year, when I played Lady Anne at the Odyssey Theatre, I knew that I was having one of those moments. I knew to trust myself and my instrument because of all the tests I had faced, faltered on, and conquered within the class environment, including that one.

Out of the Muck

I tell you all of this, not so you should follow my path but because we all take different paths. That is what makes us unique as artists when we get there, and that is what is hard to see when we're in the muck of it—in the freedom within the acting classroom. The clinging of the group mentality, hopefully, miraculously creates the blossoming of the individual.

That individual can then reject her surroundings when she's ready, or rejoice in her accomplishments without holding anyone's hand. Hopefully, that is what our teachers want for us.

We must find what's right for us and remember not to get stuck there, to move on into the professional world despite the many comforts and distractions. And to return to the study when we need to, for the sheer study of it, for the acting.

Anyway, find your balance and enjoy your class, for within this profession the choice of where and how you study may be the only thing you control.

Remember: Get lost to get found.

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