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Acting without Bullshit

Dr. Rodney Whatley
Pensacola State College
2190 White Pines Drive
Pensacola, FL 32526
E-mail: rwhatley@pensacolastate.edu
850-484-1807

Abstract

This article is a guide to honest acting. Included is a discussion that identifies dishonest acting and the actor training that results in it. A definition of what truth onstage consists of is contrasted with a description of impractical acting exercises that should be avoided. The consequences of acting with bullshit are revealed. The article concludes with a description of the most practical and honest acting exercise.

If you are a performance artist who loves shows with no dialogue, characters without names, or an unconnected series of events in lieu of plot, this essay isn't for you. If you are an artist who communicates with sounds instead of words, this isn't for you. However, if you like plots with specific characters pursuing superobjectives despite conflict, that explores the human condition, this essay *is* for you. This is a guide to practical, straightforward and honest acting. The actor must be honest in the relationship with the audience because you can't shit a shitter, so don't try.

How can actors be honest onstage when acting is lying? By studying with good acting teachers who teach good acting classes, and aye, there's the rub. Bad acting teachers train actors to get lost within their own reality, to surround themselves with the "magic" of acting and "become the character." This teaches that the goal of acting is to convince the audience that the actor *is* the character. The actor's personality vanishes and is replaced by another identity.

Bad acting teachers claim to lose themselves completely in the character. Stella Adler and teachers of her brand advise that your acting method should include "complete realism, ensemble acting, and an absolute identification with the character, which can lead to complexities whereby the actor might delve into the character's subconscious, or move in his time-and-space process" (Shipman 10). They are lying. Actors never completely become the character. It is a fictional construct, therefore it has no subconscious. If this were possible, even for a short run of *Othello*, you would need numerous Desdemonas and Othellos, because every night she will die and he will be arrested for murder.

Marlon Brando was the poster boy of the Method style of acting in his generation of artists. However, Bette Davis remarked of Marlon Brando and other Method actor performances in the mid-20th century: "They have simply learned to express themselves; and I'm terribly happy for them. When they learn to express the character, I shall applaud them Then there's the question of style. Without it, there is no art. As personal as these troubled actors are, there is – aside from much of a muchness – the same of a sameness. They are all so busy revealing their own insides that, like all X-ray plates, one looks pretty much like the other. Their godhead, the remarkably gifted Marlon Brando, may bring (as all true stars do) his own personal magnetism to every part, but his scope and projection are unarguable" (Shipman 10).

Here she makes the point that the Method style Brando was taught is ineffective, and that only his personal magnetism allows him to transcend the inferior process he has been trained to use in the performance of his roles.

Many beginning actors' exposure to acting is from electronic media with only minute exposure to stage acting. Bad acting teachers whose students largely work in film speak of becoming the character and making the work real. The renowned Stella Adler writes of realism:

“You play the play and you play the character to reveal the author’s idea. You never play yourself. The actor’s aim is to serve the theatre, never himself” (Adler 238). This can be taken to mean the actor has to absent himself from the experience. With all due respect, shut the fuck up. This may work for film actors, but it should not be the stage actor’s goal. Without the actor, there is no character or play. This is impractical advice as everything is filtered through the actor. Adler’s goals may work for film actors, but they should not be the stage actor’s objective.

The stage actor who focuses only on convincing the audience that the actor is the character is attempting to perform a magic trick: “Nothing up my sleeve, poof! Abracadabra! The character appears before your very eyes!” Stage magic is not real, and neither is the magic actor. The actor is lying to the audience, and they know it. The audience knows they are in a theatre, watching an actor on the stage lie to them and they don’t like it.

Another term used by magic actors and their teachers is being “natural” on the stage, which is a pile of bullshit of a different color. Cameron and Hoffman, in their book, *The Theatrical Response*, note: “Indeed, for as far back as at least the Restoration period, each dominant school of acting has defined itself as natural and the school which it has displaced as artificial; our own ‘technique’ versus ‘method’ controversy is a manifestation of the same split. In every age, actors who cannot fully master their instruments are inclined to label the work of those who can as ‘artificial.’ Confusing their egos with their creative imaginations, they are inclined to call their own work ‘natural’ – meaning, it would seem that it is a manifestation of themselves rather than of an acquired set of gestures, rhythms, vocal patterns, and so on. Beneath this attitude, of course, is a misunderstanding of the nature of acting, a misunderstanding that has an equally limiting counterpart in the artificial or technical actor who has full control of his instrument but little or no ability to exercise his imagination. Whereas the first actor, the ‘natural,’ confuses his own feelings, his own ego, with creativity, the second actor confuses his own love of self-display, his desire for public exposure, with externalizing the role” (252-253).

The goal of the stage actor is to pursue vividly the character’s goal. Trying to convince the audience your character is a real person is never applicable, not even in realism, and realism is only one of a plethora of acting styles.

Audiences don’t have to believe that a dancer is a “character” in choreography in order to enjoy the dance. Audiences can appreciate the skills of actors’ performances in the same way. Audiences exercise the willing suspension of disbelief so that they can let actors blind them with brilliant, skilled and talented displays. Audiences don’t want deception; they want artistic beauty. To see real people in the theatre they need only turn their heads to look at other audience members. You ever see those commercials with the blurbs on the screen that describe the images as being “real people, not actors”? There are no real people onstage, only actors.

Mysticism

Acting is not magic. Heck, it’s not even all about talent. If someone says of an actor, “That kid’s got it!” that someone is full of crap. Yes, there are people born with more innate ability than others. For instance, I can only run so fast and jump so high, particularly since I’m an old white guy. People try to tell me I’m middle-aged, but if I live to be 114, please, just kill me.

Much of acting is a skill, just ask Stanislavski. Or pretend to, since he’s dead. I’m not going to cite him because you should go do your own research at an actual library. Don’t just sit there and Google. And you kids get off my lawn. Oh, okay here’s a citation. I hope it makes you happy. Stanislavski has written of the skill, not talent needed by actors in order to perform successfully. He calls it a need to achieve the “creative mood.”

“...creativity on the stage demands first of all a special condition, which for want of a better term, I will call the creative mood.... Nevertheless, all men of the stage, from the genius to the mediocrity, are able to receive the creative mood, but it is not given them to control it with their own will.”

He goes on to describe the creative mood thusly:

“What I wanted to learn was how to create a favorable condition for the appearance of inspiration by means of the will, that condition in the presence of which inspiration was most likely to descend into the actor’s soul.... If it is necessary to develop each of the component elements in one’s self separately, systematically, by a series of certain exercises – let it be so! If the ability to receive the creative mood in its full measure is given to the genius by nature, then perhaps ordinary people may reach a like state after a great deal of hard work with themselves - not in its full measure, but at least in part” (Cole and Chinoy 492).

Stanislavski knew that there are specific skills that improve with education, coaching, work, repetition, and practical experience with actual audiences that will dependably create good acting. A true test of whether an actor has a command of the skillset is the reaction of a paying audience. If they like the performance: good job. If they don’t: bad job. These are real world results without teachers grading you or classmates attacking you.

Don’t trust what your teachers tell you because they are not invested in you the way you are. There are a startling number of bad acting teachers that tell some students to change majors because they aren’t perfectly beautiful, sexy, or the most brilliant actor ever born. A bad teacher tells you to minor in education so upon failure you can support yourself by teaching English and maybe be the drama club sponsor. Bad teachers believe their opinions are facts. But that’s just my opinion.

And while there may be some good acting students in class with you, you don’t know which ones you can trust. They may see you as a threat and want you to fail. Acting is a contact sport and your classmates’ goal is to prove that they are the best. One way for people to make themselves look good is to make you look bad, so that the superior grade belongs to them. They must win and you must lose, because when you fail they win! Yay!

The only opinions that matter are those of casting directors and audiences. Casting directors hire actors so they can make money. Audiences hold actors responsible for the presentation of truth onstage that reveals to them some aspect of the human existence that, prior to the play’s performance, was a mystery to the audience.

When the acting lesson is that actors must become someone else, that students must “transform themselves into the character,” some actors do research, which is good, for interior creation. For exterior creation they dabble with makeup or dramatically change their body weight. Problem? Actors cannot become characters. Actors, whether their self-esteem is positive or negative, are themselves, not other people. They can change appearances, voices, accents, movement signatures, body language, and other exterior factors, but inside? They are themselves pretending to be the character.

It’s like on a first date where you pretend to be the person they are attracted to instead of who you are. Eventually they will discover the truth, and when you break character, they will break up with you. Actors tend to have a superior inferiority complex, in that we simultaneously think we are awesome and that we suck. Is it logical? No. But if we were logical people, we’d be mathematicians, not thespians.

Actors cannot transform into characters because actors are real humans and characters are fictional constructs. Actors can pretend, that is what actors do, but they cannot fictionalize themselves. In David Mamet’s book, *True and False*, of this concept he writes:

“The play is a fantasy, it is not a history. The playwright is not *withholding* information, he is *supplying* all the information he knows, which is to say, all the information that is germane. ‘The character’ did not spend any time *at all* in Germany. He never was *in* Germany. There is no character, there are just black marks on a white page – it is a line of dialogue. An actual person who said he had been in Germany would be able to answer the question ‘For how long?’ *You* are an actual person, but the character is just a sketch, a few lines on the page; and to wonder of the character, ‘How many years might he have spent in Germany?’ is as pointless as to say of the subject of a portrait, ‘I wonder what underwear he has on?’ And no answer the questioner might receive could, finally, be acted upon. ‘I spent some years in Germany’ cannot be acted differently than ‘I spent twenty years in Germany.’ It can only be *delivered* differently” (Mamet 60-61).

If an actor truly believes that they are fiction, well, that’s why God made therapy. You can change your social roles in life, but you are you, no matter how you behave. No matter how deep and lovely the playwright has made the character, it is not real. The closest characters come to reality is that they are fractions of the playwright’s personality. Actors cannot be the playwright, who is a separate and real human being. Even actors cannot be two real people.

The only way an actor can transform into and thus inhabit the playwright is if the actor is a demon and has possessed the playwright, in which case a performance is not called for unless it is that of an exorcist.

What follows are some exercises that could lead to bad acting.

The Machine

In this non-practical exercise, students are ordered to enter an arena of students. The sacrificial actor is commanded to perform a repetitive physical motion. Then the actor must generate an accompanying noise for the motion. Once the actor has established their motive sound, another actor has to enter the arena and join with the first actor so that they become a human motion sculpture. Thereafter all of the Tributes join to create a giant human machine, working in perfect harmony.

“Okay, what the fuck? What the fuck is this?” declares my inner bullshitometer. I am an actor who brings a script from the page to the stage. No script I’ve ever encountered calls for the cast to become a giant human caterwauling machine. And unless there is an upcoming stage adaptation of *The Human Centipede* I don’t think there ever will be. And if that show arrived, I wouldn’t audition for it, because if I got cast I’d have to spend eight shows a week with my mouth taped to another actor’s anus.

Animorphing

In this exercise, students are forced to become animals. They begin by making a sound that inaccurately corresponds to an animal of the instructor’s choosing. These random animal designations have nothing to do with the students’ natures, as they would if students chose them, but are forced on them by the instructor. The instructor’s defense might be, “Actors don’t get to choose their roles.” But they do. Auditioning actors *chooseto* accept or decline roles. The only place without freedom of choice is in acting class. At animal time.

I once was a zebra. The teacher mispronounced the word, as zee-bra. I resisted the urge to say, “Really? Zee-bra? It’s Debra, not Dee-bra, and what am I playing, a Manichean horse?” So I was to make like a zebra. The class was to infer which animal I portrayed. They all guessed horse, so I failed animorphing.

There are plays where actors have to play animals, for instance *Cats*; however, *Cats* has nothing to do with actual cats. It’s a collection of ideas set to music with dancers pretending to be musical theatre actors when all they are is singing dancers. None of the characters actually move like cats; they move like Broadway hoofers. And the make-up and costumes are so extensive that all hoofers have to do to look like a cat is just stand there. Audiences just look at them and say, “Oh look, a cat.” No movement or meowing is required.

Playing animals can be fun, but I have only ever been cast as an animal once, in a play called *Wiley and the Hairy Man*. I played “Dog.” And it was awesome. But none of the animal morphing exercises I was forced to undergo helped me at all because the director knew what she wanted, and worked with me towards her desired interpretation of the character in rehearsal. In fact, at the first blocking rehearsal, when I tried something from a class exercise, she stopped me and said, “What are you doing?” When I proudly informed her I was using my training in animorphing, she replied, “Have you ever heard a dog make those sounds, or seen one behave like that?”

Oh, doth the director have a valid pointeth. So, if you have to play an animal, there’s a tried and true three step method: observe, imitate and enact. In step one, you observe the animal that you will be portraying. In step two, you imitate those sounds and actions that you have observed. You don’t imagine them without research and you don’t improvise them, as forced to do in acting class. Use that imitation as a foundation and select appropriate behaviors for the character in partnership with the director.

The important thing is that you communicate to the audience that your character is an animal and not that you feel like an animal. The audience knows you are an actor on the stage and they want to enjoy the show, not watch *An American Werewolf in London: The Musical!* Audiences don’t go to *Swan Lake* to see dancers moving like birds, and they don’t go to *Cats* to see frolicking felines; they go to see actors give brilliant performances.

Improvisation

Everybody thinks they are great at improvisation. Because people improvise and “act” every day of their real lives, they think to themselves, “Well, I do this every day in every conversation I have, this is going to be easy.” It’s the universal urge that leads people to do community theatre. Because people lie all day or they are handsome-beautiful-sexy, people tell them, “You should be an actor” without ever hearing them deliver a line of dialogue. Just like everybody thinks they can do theatre without training and only talent, so do people think they are great at improv.

Notice this is almost exclusive to performing arts. People can also run, bump into each other, put on helmets and pads, and hold a ball, but how many full contact community football teams are there? I’m guessing not many, because it would hurt too much. Acting, done well, actually hurts more, which brings us back to improvisation. Improv has its place, but not in an acting class.

Improvisational exercises are sources of pain and discomfort for actors. Acting teachers can use improv to exert dominance over the class. In such a situation, the teacher pretends to randomly pick a situation and character for a student. The student has no idea what they are doing and so they feel horrible. The student may feel the teacher is shaming the student for their lack of talent. If the student believes the teacher is shaming them, other students will extemporaneously ejaculate spurts of applause as a defense mechanism. That makes the victim student blush until their head pops off their neck.

In improvisation exercises, actors enter into situations. A group improvisation exercise is a worse actor’s nightmare than anything Christopher Durang’s deranged imagination ever imagined. Actors are forced to accept that they are playing a desire, such as “You want to make the other person give you a massage.” Then the teacher may tell the other actors that they are to play a condition, such as “You have arthritis.” This is meant to engender conflict. Students are expected to create a fully realized personality construct, and should they fail, and they will, to convince the teacher that the unsatisfactory condition or desire they’ve been given is a convincing symbol of humanity, the teacher may provide negative feedback, making the student actor feel that their work is lackluster, and thus is created improv shaming.

Uta Hagen says of improvisation “Improvisations, which serve for a better understanding of the reality of character, circumstances, time and place, emotions, and the possibilities of varied action, can be of tremendous value” (73). The problem with this is it depends on the actor having concrete given circumstances instead of generic labels, like, “You are a father. Your wife has come home late. It is morning in the kitchen. You are angry. What do you do?” I took acting classes for decades, and when it comes to improv exercises, this is a standard scenario. It bears no fruit in the practical rehearsal and performance of a specific play, even if the given circumstances match in some form this blather.

The second problem with this set up is that it insists the actor play an emotion. One emotion. And actors can’t play an emotion. We are not called emoters, we are called actors, because we perform actions. In fact, for those who are emoters, we use a pejorative term: hams.

Hagen goes on to say, “Therefore the value of improvisational exercises away from concrete sequences of the play to find spontaneous actions and emotions must become obvious” (73). Must it, though? Finding spontaneous actions, when the actions are either scripted or discovered in conjunction with the director during the rehearsal process? This takes the position that the actor is in sole possession of their character, which is not true. It is shared with the playwright, the director, the rest of the cast and the technical crew. It is also shared with the audience, since they are playmates. The audience finishes the portrait of the character based on the symbol of a human being that is reflected by the performance of the actor. The actor and the audience create the character together, and improvisation makes of everyone a sideline observer to the selfish creative process of the performing actor.

Finally, it turns out Uta Hagen, whose name sounds like a flavor of ice cream at Ben and Jerry’s, doesn’t even know what the definition of improvisation is. She says in her instructions on how to improvise, “Avoid general ad-libbing, set up time and place and objectives and who you are. Surprise each other as partners. Don’t paraphrase. Use the magic ‘If’ in endless variations, and you might come up with gold” (74). Time and place are set up by the playwright and/or the director. Objectives comes from script analysis. Who you are is distilled from the actions the character takes in pursuit of the superobjective. And finally, her description of improvisation is a list of things to do during rehearsal of the script. This is not improvisation!

This is the actual rehearsal process. Rehearsal is making choices and trying those choices out. The rehearsal process is elimination of weak choices so that the strongest choices are the ones the audience sees. Making choices during rehearsal isn't "improvisation;" it is rehearsing.

Uta Hagen says improv is essential, and I call bullshit. Improvisation is a useless exercise, because actors in plays are given scripts. Actors are given rehearsals. Actors are given guidance and coaching by their directors. There has never been a dramatization of dramatic literature where the playwright and director had a huddle and then turned to the cast and said, "You are Biff. You are Willy. You are a travelling salesman, and you are his son. Willy is in a hotel room with a woman, Biff knocks on the door. You guys just improv your way through the scene, let's see what happens."

Actors are actors; they are not writers.

Bad acting teachers may approach blocking in this dubious improv manner. They tell the student actors, "Just move when you feel the urge and see what happens."

Novice actors given the opportunity to move whenever they get the urge usually stand immobilized and adjacent to each other in awkwardness partnerships. Feeling shame.

Improvisation is a separate art form and requires completely different training and a different skillset than acting. Such training should only be supplied by improvisation experts. Developing the improv ability of actors is a massive undertaking. Either they have the instinct, or they don't. Talent can't be taught, and to tell a student anything else is to fill them with bullshit.

Melting Sculptures

In this exercise, the students array themselves around the space so that they can explore their physicality without slapping neighboring students. Students are compelled to pick an emotion and become statues which symbolize that emotion. This makes them things of substance, impervious to movement. After this is accomplished, students must conjure a different emotion and concomitant pose. Then comes the really fun part: they slowly "melt" from the first statue to the second.

This is a bad exercise because it teaches actors bad things, the major bad thing being what it encourages actors to do: indicate! Boo! Indication is bad! Boo! Actors should never indicate, or "show" the audience what the character is feeling. Showing an audience what you are feeling is akin to surface beauty. Laurette Taylor, one of the great American actresses of the first half of the 20th century, speaks of the difference between beauty and art in an article titled, "The Quality Most Needed." Taylor reveals the concept between indicating, or surface beauty, and enacting, or inner beauty.

"Beautiful women seldom want to act. They are afraid of emotion and they do not try to extract anything from a character that they are portraying, because in expressing emotion they may encourage crow's feet and laughing wrinkles. They avoid anything that will disturb their placidity of countenance, for placidity of countenance insures a smooth skin.... Personality is more important than beauty, but imagination is more important than both of them. Beauty as I understand it does not mean simple prettiness, but stands for something illusive and subtle. The obvious seldom charms after one has had to live close to it for any length of time. Being all on the surface, there is nothing left to exhilarate, once the surface has been explored. On the other hand, the beauty which emanates from within becomes more enchanting upon close acquaintance. It is constantly revealing itself in some new guise and becomes a continual source of joy to the fortunate persons who have the privilege of meeting it frequently. That is beauty of the imagination, and that beauty all the really great actresses have" (Cole and Chinoy 596).

Lack of imagination, or indication, is surface beauty. Acting from the given circumstances is the inner beauty that grows more beautiful and entrancing with every performance.

Performing the dramatic action generates the emotion, or put succinctly, *motion creates emotion*. Actors need feel nothing, they just need to perform motions that emblemize to the audience someone encountering that emotion. What do angry people do? Perhaps they gnash their teeth, punch things, stomp their feet, scream or call for mommy? Audiences can see that and think, "That character's angry!"

Sculptures do not feel things. Sculptures indicate, but they don't communicate. Actions reveal, they don't dictate. Sculptures, unless placed under tremendous heat, do not melt. But if they do, it is into a puddle, not another statue.

Trust Falls

A normal human reaction: “I just met you. I don’t trust you.”

Acting teachers may preach to classes that theatre people are a family and that we should all support each other. Nope. Uh-uh.

Actors are taught, nay indoctrinated and trained, to destroy each other like a pack of Mean Girls, or a locker room full of testosterone junkies. It’s in the first step of the business: the audition. Actors strive to beat other actors for the beloved and desired call back.

In class, actor wants A’s but more than that, they want recognition as the best actor, because the best actor gets a Tony or an Oscar. University and college acting teachers usually direct at least one mainstage show each season, so by kicking classmate butt acting students can grease the chute for easy casting.

This can inculcate in a student the attitude that it is not enough that I succeed but the other actors must pale in comparison. Acting teachers may give lip service to resisting this mindset, but there is still a strong likelihood that Student A will do their absolute best to assure that Student B will become a loud, visible failure.

Theatre is a contact sport.

It’s driven into our heads by our body of dramatic literature. Ever hear of a little play called, oh, I don’t know, *42nd Street*? It’s the great thespian fantasy: the lead who never deserved to have the part anyway, gets accidentally maimed/killed and the ingénue unjustly cast as the understudy or *Moving Scenery #22*, must now perform the part in order to save the show. Actors want to win the Dionysian Lotto.

It is therefore completely understandable that beginning students may think to themselves, “I don’t know you. I just met you. But I know who you are. You’re an actor. And I don’t trust you.”

Poppycock Protocol

There’s a song lyric by Billy Preston as well as a math maxim that says, “Nothing from nothing leaves nothing, and you got to have something, if you want to be with me.”

“Me” is the audience. Nothing from nothing means that all you get with bullshit acting is a bullshit show, so actors and audiences derive bagatelle. The audience will have nothing to tweet home about, nor will there be positive word of Facebook/Instagram post. I should say at this point, or rather should have said much sooner, that no bullshit means all truth.

The audience, subjected to bullshit acting which results from bullshit exercises in bullshit acting classes, will leave the theatre dissatisfied. The discerning audience member will walk out saying, “Well, that was a waste of time. Remind me to never come to another show here. It’s better to stay home and watch gangster movies on Netflix.” The discerning audience member will then, when asked, fail to recommend said show to their friends, neighbors, and fellow discerners. The discerning audience member may not even wait to be asked, nay, like a thoroughbred itching to break free of the release gate at the Kentucky Derby, this audience member will rush into the community to warn one and all to stay away from yon theatre like a latter day Paul Revere, warning that, “The bovine excrement is coming! The bovine excrement is coming!” This would be unfortunate because the secret to success in theatre is repeat business. Business.

The less discerning audience member will be likewise dissatisfied, if not on a conscious level. They will leave the theatre, and when asked by friend and family, they will respond as to the quality of the play thusly: “It was okay. It was missing something, I don’t know, I just didn’t really like it. It was okay, but oh look pretzels!” They may not know why they did not like the show, but like a mutant power in a pre-teen X-Man character, it lies there waiting for its inevitable activation.

Without truth, no one will enjoy the show, and the show will not, as it must, go on. Word of mouth will kill your show. I don’t know why we depend on word of mouth, rather than word of sign language, or word of print, or word of data input, but there you have it. Word to your mother, even she will only tell you she liked the play because she’s your mother. Unless she’s Joan Crawford, then she will beat you with the program as she yells, “No BS acting!”

The production team won't enjoy the production, either. The technicians will hate the actors because they are full of crap. Full of crap actors tend to subconsciously overcompensate by acting like jerks. They'll be aloof, condescending, and separate themselves from all other team members, not only techs but other actors. There will be no camaraderie, there will be no unity of purpose, there will be much backstage drama, and the director will be a tyrant because they feel that they have no control over the quality of the production. It will be a bad show, and there will be nothing the director can do about it.

Warm-ups could become useless because actors who consider themselves the stars will either be late to the exercises, or skip them entirely. This can cause resentment in the actors who do show up diligently and participate in the warm-ups. Backstabbing can run rampant, and rather than making friends whom they will keep for life, the company ends up making enemies they will never forget.

This makes the show even worse because the audience will sense that the actors are not having a good time. If the actors aren't having a good time, neither will the audience. No matter how talented the actors, they will fail to convince the audience that hatred is affection. Instead of yearning for goals, the actors are praying for the sandbag of legend to fall from the grid and eliminate the bullshit artist standing next to them. The audience will realize that the actors are lying to them. They didn't come to the theatre for actors to lie to them; they came to be told the truth about the human condition, to have some mystery of life explained to them, and to make sense out of life, the universe and everything.

The problem is that truth is not the same as fact. Truth is an opinion. Something that one person considers a lie can actually be another person's version of truth, if that person believes it to be true. With no clear definition of truth in acting, bad acting teachers teach lies. Stella Adler, for instance, says that truth is in Henrik Ibsen's writing when she speaks of acting in his works. "When you understand this truth, Ibsen's words mean something. The truth is big – don't tear it down. We want to hear Mr. Ibsen, not you" (239). She is speaking of the perceived truth in the central theme in her analysis of *A Doll House*. But we can't hear Mr. Ibsen, he is not here, only the actor is. Theatregoers can only hear the actor's voice, not that of the playwright, and not that of the character, for the character's voice is that of the actor.

Adler advises analyzing the outside world for all contributions to the art of acting, because truth comes from the world, a major tenet of Adler's theory of realism: "You must be fed from the outside. If you feed only from yourself, you're pathological. There's no life where there's nothing outside. You must take time with things – to be nourished by them, not merely serviced" (244). This can be taken to mean that the world of the character is real, that props are real, and that they are more important as a source of inspiration than the internal qualifications or qualities that an actor brings to each role they play.

And finally, Adler calls bullshit on some of the concepts introduced by Stanislavski. With all due respect to her: wow, that takes real guts. To say Stanislavski is full of it? Awesome. She argues against the superobjective concept when she writes, "Remember, you cannot reduce any character to one element. It's not ambitious to take care of the garden," in discussing *Death of a Salesman*. She goes on to write, "Ambition always leads to something bigger than being practical. Practicality doesn't involve the soul" (Adler 247). Here she is arguing against practicality, like practical actor training, or non-bullshit training, or acting without magical bullshit. I disagree. Obviously? Obviously. Stella Adler would probably hate this essay.

Bad performances created by such teachings can serve, like a meteor to dinosaurs, to exterminate the theatre. The air of insincerity incumbent upon bad performances is a cloud of dust that chokes the world of the play, and the audiences could scurry away from the theatre never to return. Like deficit spending and trillion dollar debts to other countries and an unwillingness to admit that climate change is real and destroying the environment and the quality of life, we could be robbing future generations of theatre artists, and audiences of the magic that is live theatre.

Memorization

So what is my truth, my way to eliminate bullshit and illuminate the path to good acting? Read my forthcoming book, *Acting One: What Do I Do with My Hands?* Here's a preview, thank you thank you, you're too kind.

The most practical exercise in acting class involves memorization. It should feel good for an acting student to lock themselves up in a room and solidly affix a speech to their skull with a ten inch nail, or other hyperbolic metaphor. If it doesn't feel good, maybe they should look into a career in accounting.

One memorization technique is paraphrasing. Rephrasing the lines teaches the actor ideas, not words, so that if the actor goes blank they can still communicate the gist of the lines rather than standing before their partner, eyes bulging, beads of sweat trickling down into their underwear, mumbling, "I don't know what to say." This is why improvisation exercises are of little value to actors who work with scripts. An actor can paraphrase instead of improvising.

Then there is when the actor makes a mechanical connection to the material: much beloved though hand-cramping, this involves writing out the lines repeatedly in longhand, not typing. This forces actors to chew each word thirty times, which aids in digestion, because people write slower than they speak or type. And write in cursive, dammit! (See what I did there?)

In my humble opinion, the best memorization method is linear incrementalization. Yes, I just made that word up. In incrementalization™, actors learn the first sentence. They repeat it until they have it. Once that is done, they memorize sentence two. Then they add the first sentence to the second. Then they add the third, blah blah, blah, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera you get the idea. Actors can obfuscate the lines below by using an index card, so they aren't tempted to peek. The secret to success for this is to work it work it work it. Push it real good.

Line memorization is a practical exercise that helps with actual performances. Bullshit acting results from other exercises that serve no practical purpose. If you want to steer clear of bullshit acting, steer clear of bullshit exercises like the ones covered here, which are the ones that drove me insane in acting class. Well, not insane, as that is part of my personality, or should I say personality disorder, a condition I share with most good actors, and the element that drove me to have an superior inferiority complex. I began to believe that the purpose of acting exercises was not to make me a better actor, but to convince me that I was a horrible actor so that I would be completely dependent on acting teachers for life, thus insuring their job security, sort of like lifetime appointments to the Supreme Court of theatrical education. Boy, talk about oral arguments.

So don't act with bullshit. To paraphrase Michael Caine, in his book *Michael Caine on Acting in Film*: learn your lines, learn your blocking, and show up on time. I can only add to that by saying be nice. Be honest. And most of all have fun. No cake for actors who at having fun are unsuccessful.

Works Cited

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Biography

Rodney Whatley has a BFA in Theatre from the University of Montevallo, an MFA in Theatre from Lindenwood University, and a Ph.D. in Dramatic Theory and Criticism from Florida State University. He has previously published a book entitled *Mametspeak*. He has had four plays produced, but not had one published yet. He looks forward to breaking through that barrier after a career in education of over 27 years and counting. I'm 57 so I got a few years left to go!