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From Stage to Screen: Applying the Method Technique of Acting to Adapt a One-Act Play as a Feature Length Screenplay

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes “The Bear,” a one-act play by Anton Chekhov, and the author’s exploration of it as an actress on stage at the Actors Studio in New York City. The Method emphasizes the merging of the actor’s personal journey with that of the character. The play provided a blue print for the process of exploration. That on-stage exploration, combined with a script analysis of the play, resulted in an understanding of the many unanswered questions regarding the nature of the characters and their relationship to each other. The answers discovered to many of those questions provided the additional material outside of the given text for the development of an original feature length screenplay.

Particular techniques from the Method used by the actors in exploring the play are described and illuminated in the paper. In addition, the paper describes the author’s use of events from her personal life to inform her understanding of the characters. The application of the author’s personal circumstances and each of the elements of technique to the play resulted in insights into the characters and their relationships that enabled the author to collaborate with a writer to develop the adapted screenplay.

Having outlined a screenplay, various of the techniques were reapplied in the development of the working script, illustrating the power of the Method as a tool for collaboration with a writer and highlighting the important ability of the Method-trained actor to influence and shape the creation of an original piece of art.

Finally, the paper discusses how the author uses the lessons and discoveries of the adaptation process in her teaching at the School of Visual Arts where her focus is training filmmakers in understanding the language of actors. In the author’s view, in order for a script to be realized on screen and the director’s vision to be satisfied, the actors’ work process must be understood and a common language needs to exist between the collaborators — the writer, the director, and the actor. Without that common language and an

understanding of the actors' process, a gap will exist no matter how great the script or how fantastic the director.

Introduction

This is not a typical academic paper. It is more a personal essay than a scholarly study. It describes how I have used my training in the Method acting technique to develop (with a writing partner) a feature length dramatic screenplay inspired by Anton Chekhov's one-act play, "The Bear".

My background is as a graduate of the Actors Studio M.F.A. Program in 2000 and, by audition, as a Lifetime Member of the Actors Studio since 2002 where I continue to refine my craft through participation in stage sessions moderated by acclaimed film and stage actors. I draw on my own experience with Method acting techniques and use them in my coursework as a Faculty member of the School of Visual Arts, a leading film school where I teach acting to filmmakers, and in acting workshops I conduct in the United States and Europe, as well as an acting consultant on various film projects.

I have organized this paper into the following sections: (1) my understanding of Method acting technique, (2) a summary of the script analysis of "The Bear" from which my initial questions regarding the play emerged, (3) a description of exploratory work I undertook at the Actors Studio to develop insights into the characters in the play, (4) a discussion of how discoveries from the script analysis and exploratory work inspired the creation of a feature length screenplay, (5) a discussion of how further exploratory work as an actress continue to lead to refinements of the screenplay, and (6) a conclusion with some thoughts regarding the lessons I have learned and how they have influenced my teaching.

Method Acting

This paper does not represent the work of the Actors Studio but my own understanding and interpretation of it.

"The Studio is a place where whatever problems actors have as actors can be worked on, can be solved. Among ourselves, we sometimes say this is a place where you can fall flat on your face." - Lee Strasberg

The Actors Studio is a unique place, one where professional actors can work continuously on their process and development of their craft. It was founded in 1947 by Elia Kazan, Cheryl Crawford and Robert Lewis. Lee Strasberg became artistic director in 1951. It began as a forum for the continued exploration of the discoveries of Konstantin Stanislavsky and the Moscow Art Theatre, introduced to America in 1923, as elaborated by leading American teachers, including Lee Strasberg, Stella Adler, and Sanford Meisner.

The Actors Studio is dedicated to an approach to realistic acting that, in essence, provides tools to help the actor achieve “creative inspiration” in a concrete, dependable – but not formulaic -- way. Pushkin, Russia’s literary hero wrote that the goal of the artist is to supply truthful feelings under given circumstance. “If the ability to receive the creative mood in its full measure is given to the genius by nature,” Stanislavsky wondered, “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”.

Method Acting, as I understand it, provides a series of tools for the actor to inspire and support their creativity and embodiment of the characters they portray. Oftentimes, when people refer to “Method Acting,” that is shorthand for the techniques taught by Lee Strasberg at the Actors Studio. However, in my opinion, the techniques taught by Stella Adler and Sanford Meisner also are ways of “Method Acting”, each with a slightly different emphasis. Strasberg emphasizes the importance of personalization, Adler the importance of imagination, and Meisner the importance of connection between actors. In my view, it is impossible to separate personalization, imagination and connection. All three are necessary when an actor sets out to portray a character as a fully realized human being.

I believe Method acting is often misunderstood, largely when it is taught poorly. It has gained a reputation, because it is called a “Method,” as requiring actors to follow a rigid formula, while it is exactly the opposite. The Method is a path offering many branches, options and choices to the actor. It provides a variety of tools for the artist to use as needed, depending on the individual challenges the actor confronts – whether challenges with a role or challenges in the actor’s own life. Wherever I travel and share my understanding of the Method, people seem surprised by the liberty and freedom it offers the artist.

Tools for The Actors

The principal techniques taught by the Method are the following:

Relaxation and Concentration: To help the actor become aware of unwanted tension in the body and mind and willfully release it. Only from a relaxed instrument can the actor be expressive. Concentration is the remedy for stage fright because it gives the mind purpose, thus taking it away from the awareness of the audience.

Sensory Work: The training of the actor to recall sensory impressions from the subconscious so that the actor can respond truthfully to real or imagined sensory stimuli on stage or in front of the camera as they would in life.

Affective Memory: Using the sensory apparatus to fully explore personal memories towards realizing a truthful emotional experience.

Imaginative Substitution or Personalization: Using the senses to create a personally significant relationship between the actor with objects (e.g., persons, events, places, or physical items) on stage or on set.

Private Moment: The actor’s ability to appear “private in public,” as

Stanislawsky called it.

Animal Exercise: To take the actor to the primal self and overcome inhibitions.

Speaking Out: A useful technique in workshops or rehearsals, the actor is encouraged to overcome moments of difficulty by identifying how the actor is feeling, speaking it out and regaining the sense of truth.

Justification: To encourage the actor to have specific reasons for the actions he or she takes on stage or on set. If the actor does not believe in the reasons for the actions being taken, neither will the audience.

Magic If: The actor asks, “What would I do if I were in in these circumstances?” By using the “magic if”, the actor permits himself to believe in imaginary circumstances, which is a way of putting the actor in touch with creative freedom of her “inner child”.

Moment-to-Moment: Encourages spontaneity and gives the actor the freedom to respond naturalistically to “moment to moment” changes and deviations from a script that another actor may choose to explore.

Improvisation: Encourages the actors to search and explore “prior circumstances” (i.e., events implied but not written in a script) or to seek discoveries by acting with the freedom to ignore a strict adherence to the script, all in an effort to develop a greater understanding of the specific behaviors and specific circumstances of the characters.

Given Circumstances: All of the tools described will lead the actor to support the theme or concept of the author’s play or screenplay from an attained level of artistic achievement beyond the superficial or the obvious choices.

Script Analysis

Chekhov is one of my favorite writers. Over the years, I have seen “The Bear,” his one-act farce, performed several times, but each time I was left thinking that there must be more to this play than appears on the surface. The Bear is a seemingly easy, breezy short play of only 15 pages. It involves three characters – Elena Ivanovna Popova, a widow; Luka, her servant; and Grigory Stepanovich Smirnov, a landowner and creditor of Elena’s deceased husband. We first encounter Elena mourning her husband. Luka attempts to encourage her to stop isolating herself and to rejoin “society” and attend balls and other events. Elena tells him that she even though her husband treated her poorly during their marriage, she, at least, knows how to show her love for him through her mourning. Smirnov then arrives, an unexpected visitor who disrupts the household when he demands that Elena pay him a debt owed by her husband. Elena agrees to pay but in a few days when her estate manager returns. Smirnov, however, insists she pay him immediately and refuses to leave. Elena and Smirnov argue and, in typical farcical fashion, find themselves attracted and then falling in love. Luka is a witness to their arguments and serves as a comedic foil.

Although Chekhov himself referred to *The Bear* as a farce, I was nevertheless interested in digging deeper into the play. One of the core concepts of the Method is a belief that the actor has an obligation to look deeply at the characters in a play and not be satisfied with a one-dimensional understanding based solely on the written word. The more I read the play, the more I began to ask questions: who is Elena; where is she from; what was her life like before the play begins; what was her relationship with her husband and why she is so insistent on mourning him given we learn that he cheated on her, spent her money, and treated her unkindly; what is her relationship with Luka, who speaks to her in a more familiar way than one might think a servant would; why does Smirnov insist on demanding immediate payment even though Elena repeatedly tells him she has no money in the house, which itself made me ask whether she was lying; why did Smirnov stay at Elena's house even though he tells us he called on other debtors and left without their money and why, by the time the play ends, has Smirnov revealed that he does not really need the money; even more so I wondered how, given these initial circumstances, Elena and Smirnov fall in love so quickly.

As I became more curious about the characters, I began to think of them as real "souls", as August Strindberg prefers to call them because the term "character" assumes a very general and limited description. Thinking of the characters as real human beings, I began to wonder whether it was possible that the argument over money was only a façade to cover up a real situation – i.e., might Smirnov and Elena have met before and had a relationship? If they knew each other, then the tension between them and their eventual declarations of love would seem more based in reality. That is, their desire for each other is the subtext to their argument and the argument itself is only a show put on for the benefit of the servant, Luka, to protect Elena's good name from a society that would not approve of her illicit relationship with Smirnov. The more I thought about these "people" from my own viewpoint, beginning with my personal understanding of similar situations, the more curious I became. I was reminded of Elia Kazan who wrote that acting is psychology transformed into behavior.

Actors Exploratory Work

After analyzing the text of *The Bear* and finding so many questions about the characters, I decided to use the opportunity to appear "in session" at the Actors Studio to see what I could discover about the "souls" I was coming to know and their relationship to each other. My exploratory work enabled me to take the imaginary circumstances of the play and to combine them with the personal experiences of my life, and by merging them immerse myself in the world of the play in a way that involved the whole actors instrument -- the whole self with mind, body, heart, soul, life experiences, and imagination – and to do so on my feet in front of an audience of actors and colleagues. The musician practices the piano, the runner trains before a marathon, so the same goes for the actor.

My explorations involved using the text of the play as a blueprint and to provide a basic structure for my work. The freedom to explore without a structure is chaos, but the freedom to explore within a structure allows for artistry. Exploring the play using my personal life and background, together with imagination and the tools provided by the Method technique, took me on a journey that surprised me as an actor and ended in the creation of a screenplay that I hope to film in Romania, the place of my birth, thus continuing to merge my personal life with the story inspired by *The Bear*.

The Method technique encourages actors to free their instruments and to surprise themselves by exploring the many options the actor has for bring the character to life. We all have within us good, bad, joy, sadness, love, betrayal, light, and darkness. There is no need to look for the character outside of ourselves; instead we discover the character by working from within ourselves. The self we reshape and rediscover each time we work provides us with a more nuanced understanding of human behavior and allows us to breathe life into characters in an authentic way. No one can be like you, no one can interpret like you; only you can be original and surprising and specific and universal.

In the following paragraphs I described two of several sessions at the Actors Studio where I carried out exploratory work regarding *The Bear*.

First Attempt/First Session

The Bear as written begins with the character I was working on, Elena, in mourning for her recently deceased husband. Since acting allows for events to be created in our imagination, which naturally will be combined with our personal experience, I decided to improvise a funeral scene (a prior circumstance Elena must have experienced even though not shown in the play). At the time of this work in session, my grandfather had passed away recently. I thought it would be informative to explore how Elena felt saying goodbye to her husband by using my own sense of grief at the loss of my grandfather. By merging the personal with the imagined circumstance of the character, I was able to explore in a much more specific way the questions I had about Elena, such as why she mourns her husband so intensely even though the written text tells us he was a brute. I wanted to understand whether she loved her husband that much or whether she was putting on an act in front of the village to hide her fear of living alone.

I knew there had to be more. As Al Pacino says, as actors we have to have a lot of questions without necessarily having answers and the way we find answers begins on our feet. Acting is a physical and emotional art not at theoretical one, and the way in which we uncover the “truth” of the character is by practice. In my stage exploration, I created a space in which I appeared before my “husband’s” coffin. I knelt in front of it. I spoke to him in my native tongue, Romanian, thus creating a private space in public, and I felt the grief of my grandfather’s loss. In doing so, I came to a surprising discovery about Elena – she felt guilty about her husband’s death, which reflected the guilt I felt about not being able to attend my grandfather’s funeral. In the case of

Elena, however, I began to understand her guilt differently when I reflected on the questions I had about whether she and Smirnov had met before her husband's death. That sense of guilt I experienced became an important aspect of the eventual screenplay I co-wrote.

Second Attempt/Second Session

As I have mentioned, I had a number of questions about Elena's relationship with her deceased husband. He does not appear in the play but Elena describes him – but her descriptions are inconsistent. In some places she refers to him “as the best man” she ever knew but in almost the same breath she mentions that he cheated on her, he spent her money, he flirted with other women in front of her, and she even discovered love letters sent to him by his mistress. Yet she says again and again that she loved him and that she will mourn him for the rest of her days, and that she will show him by doing so what true love looks like. Obviously, Elena is an unreliable narrator. I began to wonder what other people in the village thought of her husband and how they reacted to Elena's exaggerated mourning of him.

To explore these questions, right before a session began and without giving time for rehearsal, I asked a few of my actor colleagues to improvise a scene with me. I asked them to appear as villagers (not mentioned in the play) who arrive at my home for a funeral dinner where they will say a few words about Nikolai, the deceased husband. The idea for this scene came from my understanding as an actor that one of the best ways to get to know a character is to listen to what other characters say about him or her.

My colleagues knew the general story of *The Bear* but the details of the specific scene we created were left to improvisational work. I remember receiving the actors outside the theater building as though the gate to the theater was the gate of Elena's house. As they arrived I invited them inside the theater, inside my house, thus using the tools of sense memory and concentration to create a believable physical place that I and the other actors, and then the audience, could believe was in fact my character's home. The actor's ability to convey the reality of the place he sees in his imagination is critical. In life we are always somewhere in a physical place. If the actor does not believe, neither will the audience.

With my guests gathered, the funeral dinner began. The actors were asked to say a few words about my husband. Valuable discoveries came out of these improvisations. Some of the actors acted conventionally in the circumstances, offering their condolences for my loss and saying nice things about the deceased. But what stood out was the work of one of my colleagues, an older gentleman who was not afraid to call my deceased husband “a bastard” and to speak honestly about his flaws. This surprised me due to the spontaneity of the actor's impulse and choice not to respect convention. What it made me realize was that even though Elena strongly proclaims in public that her husband was “the best man” she knew, she could not hide the truth from those around her. It took only a brief moment of improvisation from my colleague for me to realize

that notwithstanding Elena's efforts to delude herself, the villagers saw through her.

The discoveries from this improvised scene were to have a significant impact on the eventual screenplay as I describe below.

Creating the Screenplay

I told my writing partner about my interest in *The Bear*. He read it and independently offered his view that one way of understanding it is to assume that Elena and Smirnov had met previously. Finding we agreed that a prior relationship between these two characters provided an interesting backstory, I told him about the exploratory work I had done and some of the discoveries I had made (such as Elena's guilt surrounding Nikolai's death and the fact that her friends knew about Nikolai's cheating on her). I also told him about other exploratory work I had done, such as a scene I improvised where Elena confronts her husband's mistress and, to my surprise, eventually reconciles with her, or another improvised scene where Elena goes to church and flirts with the priest during confession. All of these elements, together with the questions I had discovered in my script analysis, became the raw materials for a screenplay.

Before we could write our screenplay, we had to understand Elena's character and personality in detail. From Chekhov's play, we felt certain that Nikolai was older than her and that the two of them married when she was young. We also concluded that Elena was someone who put a lot of value on her "social standing" – that is, she was someone very concerned with how she was seen by others. We were pleased to learn that one academic essay we read reached the same conclusion. With a better understanding of Elena, we turned to her husband, Nikolai, to ask ourselves what sort of man he was beyond the unflattering description given him by Chekhov. It was important to us to understand Nikolai better because one lesson the Method teaches is that the actor has an obligation to portray an actual human being, not a one dimensional caricature. With this in mind, we decided that Nikolai was an impoverished nobleman who married Elena in part because she was the daughter of wealthy merchants. However, Nikolai loved Elena and it was only when their marriage failed to produce an heir after many years of trying that he began to philander and have affairs.

With these story elements in mind, we found ourselves focused on three central questions, which we discovered were related. First, we asked ourselves whether Elena met Smirnov before Nikolai's death. We concluded they did. We then wondered how they met. Given the social constraints of the times about which Chekhov wrote (1880s Russia) and our conclusions about Elena's character, we felt that their meeting was not a casual one. For us to imagine Elena developing a relationship with another man, we decided that something must have gone terribly wrong in her marriage. We knew from the play that Nikolai cheated on her. However, we felt this would not be sufficient

motivation for her to leave her husband given her concerns about being seen as a good and loyal wife. Needing further reasons for Elena to leave Nikolai, and building on some of the exploratory work done on stage, we realized that an affair in which Nikolai had an illegitimate child might be a more compelling reason. But we wanted to raise the stakes even further and after doing some research into Russian society of the time, we recognized that violence towards women, including spousal rape, was the sort of problem that, when combined with Elena's discovery of Nikolai's affair and child, would be enough to cause her to leave him.

We decided that when Elena fled Nikolai, she returned to her childhood village. This was where she met Smirnov. Again based on some of the exploratory work I had done, we decided that Smirnov was a Russian Orthodox priest serving that village. One reason this appealed to me is based on my own life – my father is a Romanian Orthodox priest and knowing Orthodox priests are able to marry, I thought it would be interesting to have Elena find herself attracted to someone outside the typical literary norms. We also felt that with Smirnov as a priest, we could understand a little more why Elena felt guilty about a relationship with him. However, we also concluded that the fact that she had fallen in love with a priest was not a sufficient reason for Elena to feel so deeply guilty about Nikolai's death. Instead, we felt that her guilt would only be justified if she were somehow involved in his death. In our story, Nikolai eventually comes to take Elena home (and does so in a brutal and humiliating way in front of Smirnov and her entire village). On their way home, however, Elena and Nikolai have an argument that results in an accident in which Nikolai dies.

With these elements resolved, we then felt we understood why Smirnov eventually arrives at Elena's house after her husband's death, and we understood why he used the pretext of a debt owed to him by Nikolai to "code" his conversation in front of the housekeeper, Lucia (a change made from the play for other reasons). We made the mistake, however, of trying to use too much of the dialogue from the play to fill out the third act of our screenplay, which (during a live reading with a number of actors) we found simply did not work. We had altered the details of the story too much and had developed our characters to a point where the text of *The Bear* no longer worked for us. It was simply not believable that after one visit from Smirnov, Elena would cease her mourning and declare her love for the priest. In our view, something more was necessary for Elena to complete her character's arc. She had to become a new person, no longer making the mistakes of her past before she was able to enter into a relationship with Smirnov. Creating the final obstacles for Elena to overcome became one of the great joys of finishing our screenplay, along with the invention of a host of supporting characters not seen in Chekhov's play but who add significantly to our newly imagined story.

The Actors Work Based on the Screenplay

As discussed above, our screenplay imagines that after Elena flees Nikolai, she returns to her childhood village. There she visits her parents' graves and encounters Smirnov tending the graveyard. Elena does not realize he is the parish priest when they meet in this critical scene. Using this scene as the basis for an improvisation, I decided to explore on stage how Elena feels about Smirnov, an important question because she has arrived in her village having just learned of Nikolai's infidelity and his illegitimate child, not to mention having been raped by him.

In the stage exploration, I decided to challenge myself and use the tools of the Method, in this case sense memory, concentration and private moment, to create a "cemetery" on the bare stage without using physical objects to show the audience that I was in a graveyard. I chose to work using my senses and imaginatively to see whether I could create a space for myself that I believed to be a cemetery and then convey that sense of place to the audience. I arrived on stage with only a bouquet of flowers and using my personal memories of the graveyard attached to my father's church in my childhood village, I used pacing and rhythm as I walked to create the paths I followed among the graves.

When I arrived at the spot that I decided represented Elena's parents' graves, I knelt and began speaking in Romanian, my first language, using substitution to focus my thoughts so that I felt I was speaking to someone specific and important to me. What surprised me was that as soon as I was able to visualize the headstone in front of me, it triggered something in me and my emotions suddenly changed from those of a woman performing a conventional duty (i.e., paying her respects to the dead), to feelings of anger and desperation, and I found myself beating the graves with the bouquet of flowers I carried with me. In that moment, I began to feel guilty about my behavior so shifted into the animal exercise to give myself permission to continue exploring my organic, primal instincts and to be authentic as an actress and as the character.

While I was engaged in my work, the actor portraying Smirnov was also on stage. We had agreed only on the outlines of our improvisation so I did not know what to expect from him. My acting partner seemed to have a similar intuition to mine that day as he used his senses to create his own private moment on stage, eventually shifting into his own animal exercise. We found ourselves giving each other permission to be truthful and original without worrying whether our behavior was conventionally correct. By revealing ourselves to each other as flawed individuals, by embracing our flaws and not attempting to hide them, we found the core of the attraction Elena and Smirnov might have felt towards each other in this unusual first meeting.

In the audience feedback that followed our work, I was very pleased to hear comments about the "cinematic" nature of our work, which confirmed that our screenplay was moving in the right direction toward being a realized film.

Conclusion

My path from the stage to teaching at the School of Visual Arts has helped

me learn to modify the techniques of the Method so that they are as effective for filmmakers as they are for actors. It has taught me to be an astute observer and to guide my students based on their individual needs as they begin their journey to fully express themselves. The Method provides tools that actors, directors and writers can rely on and use, singly or in any combination, to help them convey the “humanity” of the characters they direct or about whom they write.

The Method teaches actors how to use their “instruments” – that is, their mind, senses and body, informed by their personal experiences – to fully realize the souls they portray. It is a flexible and adaptable series of techniques, not a rigid path for the artist to follow. Actors must rely on their impulses and instincts and original choices. The Method provides them with dependable tools they can rely on to support their freedom of expression when accidental inspiration does not happen. Some people say that it takes twenty years for one to become an actor. I say it takes a lifetime. Representing humanity is a responsibility and it requires practice for an entire life. As you change as a human being, so does the artist in you. When you stop the work of the actor is when you stop living.

I am excited to have discovered how to use my training in the Method to take a seeming simple, farcical one-act play, and to adapt and build upon it to create a complex, dramatic screenplay about unique, three-dimensional characters. I hope one day you will see the finished project on screen and will enjoy it as much as I have enjoyed creating it.