

“Digging for Gold”

Thurman E. Scott On Training as an Actor

The following has been taken from recent talks on acting given by Mr. Scott.

During the California gold rush of 1849, people came from all over the country hoping to strike it rich. Sometimes they paid large sums of money for maps that they believed would lead them to riches. They went into the mountains and started to dig, hoping to find that first glimmering of gold in the sand that nature sprinkled through the hills of California. Those with maps followed a very specific process. Those without maps studied the land and the rivers to see if any fragments of gold had washed down from the hills into the streams below. But the spirit was strengthened by the collective consciousness that there was gold in them there mountains, and that all you needed to do was to have the right plan, process, maps, ingenuity, discipline and commitment so that one day very soon you would reap the benefits of your labors.

The process the frontiersmen went through to obtain their new-found riches is a little bit like the process an individual goes through as he or she starts down a path of developing creatively to become an actor. In the first interviews teachers have with potential students, they often see a strong possibility that wonderful talent is lying beneath the surface, just like the California prospectors could easily determine that there was gold in them there hills. Finding the best way to get the gold out of the hills is synonymous with the teacher determining what process or path to start these students on so they will be able to express their creative essence.

Each goldmine demands a particular set of principles and rules for digging, sifting and synthesizing, and eventually getting the gold out of the hills to a way-station to be weighed, registered, and valued. The acting instrument is far more complex and needs much more care and consideration. It is also important to know that the process of creative development, unlike gold mining, is a complex journey, sometimes struggle. The beauty and expression of the essence of the talent is in its effortless execution. Individuals need to feel safe and encouraged to relax enough to allow the instrument to develop. The process of teaching acting is a process of always moving through the unknown to the known. Meaning, teaching acting must be rooted in trust and faith because you're asking individuals to stay in the moment and explore the reality and specificity of that moment. This demands trust from the teacher and trust from the student. The teacher must create a surrounding that will make the student feel relaxed, secure and curious. I say curious because in the creative process, curiosity and intuitiveness provide the inspiration to try new things. Once students find the correct choice that is appropriate for their development, or the play they are working on, they learn how to put it into light, which is putting it into an action.

Just as prospectors for gold sometimes work for months and years before they hit that vein where they discover the rich lode of gold, acting teachers go through a process of teaching many different channels trying to find the right key to unlocking that student's talent. It's important for students to find a teacher they feel they can relate to with trust and faith on a number of different levels because in the process of getting an individual to feel free emotionally, human beings have many different complex reactions when they engage in a process of interacting with one another.

This is one of the reasons I created a program that brings together all of the things a student needs to prepare for a professional career: Technique I and II, with Scene Study, Script Analysis and Character Development. By bringing together these elements, students experience continuous development. If you're always starting over in the creative process instead of continuing along the same path of development, always seeking out different teachers in different places, it is difficult for a student to develop trust. But if you find a creative surrounding where you don't have to keep stopping the process to find a new teacher to work on a new dimension of your development, you will find that the development process will be much easier. The teacher will understand issues you had in Technique I and II that may affect you as you study character and script analysis. Acting itself is a process in which the actor must always revisit the basics: where are you coming from, what are you doing, and where are you going? If there is a problem, it usually falls into one of those three categories. When you walk into the room and you aren't coming from a specific place, it means you aren't bringing a specific intention. When you're in the room, you don't know what you're doing, which then undermines the justification of where you're going. All of that is colored by the specificity of character choices.

These principles we're talking about need to be restated over and over and over. First you learn just the nature of the principles. Then that nature becomes organic and it is played out according to the choices you make as a character. Since this is a process in which the principles must be stated over and over again in many different ways, human beings' egos emerge. If they don't master something immediately, they judge themselves and start to think that others must be judging them as being either slow learners or without talent. That is the wrong evaluation. This is the precise reason that people of all different levels of ability and experience, beginning and advanced students, should all study acting together.

Often advanced students will feel too intimidated to ask the simple, kindergarten-level questions that are often the most crucial, because they fear that their teacher and fellow students will judge them as not being truly advanced or talented. This mindset stops growth. But when a beginning student in the class asks questions in a very straightforward, unashamed, almost innocent way, everyone in the class benefits from the honesty of the student just wanting to know. It brings everything back to the basics. In reality, the most advanced, PhD level of acting is always the basics. The advanced actor is always exploring and deepening his understanding of the many complex levels within the basic steps of acting. This exploration unlocks his own unique individual approach to his creative process. The beginning actor learns by observing this process. Then, out of his or her innocence, the beginner asks questions that the advanced actor is afraid to ask which creates a safe environment where the actor develops a deep sense of security and allows each individual's unique expression to deepen and reveal itself.

You must be simple and allow the impressions of the play to play upon you in order to achieve great complexity with the choices you make as an actor. Your choices and the way you apply acting techniques to elicit certain emotional, creative responses will create results that look complex. Your instrument infusing with the playwright's intentions creates a vision of great

beauty and complexity. But the process you must follow to lift this powerful life force out of you and the choices you make about the material must be very simple. *Hamlet*, for example, is about many things and contains a great deal of complexity. Since you are dealing with great complexity, you must be very simple when you approach the play just to understand it. You therefore need reassurance, security, consideration, care, discipline, and guidance along with an over arching belief in an ideal and a vision of where you want to go as a creative performer.

The student and teacher should be in alignment as to the ideal and vision. That way, they're both on a mission working together toward the vision. This is a relationship that comes out of a long tradition of nurturing and direction that has been handed down and personified by the great legacy of teachers and directors, and mentors. The teacher should embody dimensions of all these, because the journey of the creative process is sometimes akin to the struggle of digging for gold.

There will be days that you lose heart as a student. That is when your teacher must steadfastly hold together the collective vision. I'm sure there were individuals in the great gold rush who said, "Let's pack up our bags and go back east." But the visionary who started out on the journey said, "No, we came here to find gold and to find a new life. So we must fight to maintain our commitment." So, too, you as an acting student must fight to maintain your commitment to develop your creative potential, because most of what is around you will not support you to maintain your own development. The commitment to develop your instrument will be something only you can feel. You'll be very lucky if your best friends feel it. It doesn't mean they are lesser people if they don't. It just means that developing your creative potential is a journey that only you feel. In time, the inspiration you exhibit as you stay on that path will create a Pied Piper effect and the believers and the unbelievers will start to line up. They will start to feel the power, magnificence and creative essence that will come forth from your personality, your ideals, and your expression. At that point, everyone will say to you, "I'm so happy you stuck with it."

It is important to study in an institution that has a theater because all the work you do to develop yourself must ultimately be put into a creative ensemble of action. In simple terms, you must take theory, technique and all of the experiences and development you gain from class and put it into a process of rehearsing a play. This will teach you to make choices in relationship to the through line of your character. You will find that your choices are always modified by and take on a symbolic connection to the character choices made by the other actors. This is because you don't act in a world by yourself; much of your performance is a reaction to what is taking place around you. The ensemble taking place around you helps you to try things, which then gives you confidence that you have a foundation to have a vibrant, creative, illuminated life in this imaginary, dramatic situation. When you study at an institution with a theater, and the teaching technique includes an opportunity for you to participate in a directed production, you deepen your understanding of the theoretical concepts you work on in class. By experiencing and applying these concepts in a directed showcase presentation you gain a new understanding of what you've been studying. Because you'll see it, feel it and express it within the performance on the stage.

Each generation of teachers expands and builds on the discoveries of the last. My mentors and teachers, Stella Adler, Sanford Meisner, Lee Strasberg, Jerzy Grotowsky, Peggy Furey and others, were influenced by and expanded upon the teachings of Constantine Stanislavsky, Vakhtangov, Meyerhold, Boleslavsky, Micheal Checkov and others. After my many years of training, working with my mentors and many years working as a professional actor, director and teacher, I was able to expand on their legacy by developing new techniques that came out of

many years of my professional career to free the instrument, open up the imagination and liberate talent.

When my mentors were at the height of their creative powers as teachers of drama, they taught intensive classes to small groups of dedicated students. Today, for the most part, drama is not taught this way. Today, classes are big for many reasons, some of them economic. But we must be aware not to lose the integrity of what it is that is being taught. At The Actors Theatre Workshop and in this Master Class that I have created, I have taken all that I am and all that I have known and created a system of acting that allows the novice and the experienced actor a process where they can learn and practice and explore this wonderful living legacy of the ancient tradition of professional theatre in America.

When approaching the study of drama, you must start from a foundation of truth. From there everything else will come. You must learn to trust yourself as an actor. The first step is to check out your belief system. Why do you want to study acting? What do you want to achieve? Is it to get a commercial or to get rich? There is nothing wrong with those goals but there needs to be more. You need to examine your core. All human beings long to know if they can make an impact on life, if they can contribute something to the world. To make a contribution is the most profound age-old longing that every human being wants to achieve. Because in making a contribution, we give a unique part of ourselves to the world, and that is lasting and eternal.

The question becomes how do I contribute? What are the ways? You need to develop a philosophy, a way of thinking and living that is real and honest. You must find a place where you can discover your unique process to create. We live in a world that does not promote or uphold talent and individual expression. You must build a theatre within yourself. You must build a house for your talents to live in and thrive. You must discipline your life and develop a philosophy that allows you to live truthfully on the stage and in your life so that your talent can grow. You must learn to live truthfully because the time you spend in your life far exceeds the time you are on stage, and if you practice truth in life, it is reflected in the stage. Through this process, you begin to develop a vision, an ideal, a beacon of light, something that beckons you, pulls you forward, and helps guide you on those days when you've lost your way.

You build this vision, this philosophy and this house for your talent with technique. Technique creates security. The first thing you need to do before you start to work, whether you are a novice or an experienced actor, is to free the instrument to express emotional truth and to open up your imagination. In Technique you will learn a series of exercises that will allow you to accomplish this. These exercises include sensory work, movement in the imagination and emotional work. Once you've done these exercises, the instrument is in tune and in a creative state. You will learn to live truthfully in this imaginary environment and have truthful emotional responses to imaginary circumstances. You will never have to force or contrive emotions because they will simply be responses to the imaginary circumstances that you have created. This gives the actor great power, freedom, security and an unending well of inspiration.

Then you will learn about choice. In this class, you will quickly learn to make choices that give to you, that warm and evoke a passionate response in you, that move you and ultimately move your audience. Many actors make dull, boring, dead choices, either because they were taught incorrectly or they are unwilling to commit to action in life. If you don't commit to action in life, you will be passive. This passivity creates a dead actor and the audience is left uninspired, unmoved and probably angry because the actor did not live up to his or her promise and did not make choices to fulfill the intentions of the play. This is why you hear the traditional age-old adage "Within the choice lies the talent."

We must accept that actions are born within ourselves. And we must understand that life is action and sequence. Within the main action, there are steps to make up the whole action. Within sequences, you have what is called sequential sequence, which means the small steps of sequences and ideas that will make up the whole sequence. You will quickly learn you cannot play an overall action. For example, you cannot play Christmas or Hanukah. For Christmas you can give presents and decorate the Christmas tree to represent Christmas. For Hanukah you light candles and exchange gifts. The microcosm of these small steps make up the whole, but you can never play an overall action. I break it down this way to show students that steps and sequences will show you how to play the action and thereby understand the play.

Actions are the building blocks of acting. You will learn what an action is. What does it take to do something? What are the specific steps? The work of the actor is to discover what these steps are. Ultimately, you will learn about doing, and the emotion will flow out within the steps and sequence as you're doing the action. When we see acting in terms of simple doing and feeling, then we take the mystery away from it, so we can understand it in simple everyday behavior. You start with simple actions like observing a squirrel in the park or writing a letter. You will then move on to more complex actions like to argue or to discover. You will then learn to justify those actions. You learn to make a choice as to why you did this or that action. Those choices or justifications take on different shades whereby you will learn to create justifications that are light, medium, or dark. This will lead you to be able to build more complex psycho-physical actions where the psychological nuances of a character are revealed in simple physical action. The psycho-physical action represents you physicalizing the action in the expression of the complex way you feel. This combines together emotions, intellect and physicality and you express yourself emotionally and physically in the particular way that the specific character would do in that particular situation. This creates a very exciting, explosive and complex dramatic expression of theatre in that moment. And this moment is a classical, legendary, hallmark expression of traditional, contemporary, dramatic classical drama.

This brings us to **Character Development**. You will gain a deep understanding of the nature of what a character is, meaning the character's essence, his or her inner and outer life. You will intimately understand how that character will act in any given situation. Having gained that understanding, you may decide to make an unusual choice that goes against what that character would normally do. That represents a complex choice that you made that means you are out of character. Having all of these tools allows the actor to begin to create characters of depth and complexity. Here you begin to make a series of choices that reveal the many layers and levels that influence how the character does his or her action. Through the course of a rehearsal process, these actions and steps within the actions are knitted together to create a performance of power, deep complexity and believability.

Script Analysis or breakdown is about understanding. By studying the scripts of the great dramatists, the actor learns to understand the world and how it operates on a universal level. You understand how each image and character in the play represents major archetypes and big, universal ideas, such as the idealist, the realist, the pragmatist and the philistine. These archetypes and big ideas help us understand our world and how we fit in as individuals and as a community. We learn that the actor needs to stand outside society to ultimately interpret and give understanding and insight to what is going on in society so that it can grow and change.

I teach **Technique, Character Development** and **Script Analysis** to prepare the actor to work on scenes. In **Scene Study** you apply in a practical, hands-on way all of the elements you have just examined and experienced. You put them to work for you as you read your script and

rehearse your scene. There is no better way to learn. The work you do in scene study prepares you to create and rehearse a performance piece that you present in a showcase of directed work for the general public audience. By immediately applying what you have learned in scene study, you stretch your capacity to achieve a breakthrough performance that leaves a lasting impression on the world.

In the Master Class, I teach all of the elements of the actor's craft in one class. Together we will examine and explore each issue. I will present each element of the actor's craft and you will immediately put it into action in order to see the practical application of the concept at work. You will get the whys and the hows of the actor's craft. You will get the ultimate actor's toolbox that you will be able to pull out when you are developing a character for a play or film. It is a very practical class that will yield extraordinary results.

This is a class that you can come back to again and again to further deepen your craft. As I said, I want a class with everything in it for all actors at all levels so they can learn from each other and relearn all that it takes to act. In this class, you will be given all of the information: the secrets of acting and the tools to unlock those secrets and live in the mysteries that will unfold in your quest and magnificent journey as an artist.