

# An Interview with William Esper

*William Esper has had an acting studio in New York since 1965. For the past eight years he has also headed the MFA and BFA professional actor training programs at the Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers University. A graduate of the Neighborhood Playhouse, where he studied with Sanford Meisner and Martha Graham, Mr. Esper underwent teacher training with Sanford Meisner and subsequently worked with him for many years, becoming a leading exponent of Mr. Meisner's technique. He is also a former director of the Company Lab at Circle Repertory Company in New York, and has been a guest artist and directed productions at Canada's Banff Festival, the St. Nicholas Theatre Company in Chicago, and WPA Theatre and Circle Rep in New York.*

*Mr. Esper believes that the "real contact between actors comes when they listen to what they are saying to each other, and then respond truthfully from themselves, from their own point of view." He subscribes to Sanford Meisner's principle that what an actor does doesn't depend on him, but on what the other actor does to him. He believes that this is the foundation from which all acting training should begin.*

## **How did you get started teaching acting?**

My own background is with Sanford Meisner. I went to the Neighborhood Playhouse and studied with him, and I finished just before he went out to California to become head of talent for Twentieth Century-Fox. He got very disenchanted and came back to New York to found the American Musical and Dramatic Academy, which still exists today, but in a very different form. While Meisner was there it had a fantastic faculty. That was about twenty-three years ago. Things got shaky at AMDA and Sandy went back to the Neighborhood Playhouse. I went with him and stayed until 1977.

What I teach is based on what I learned from Sandy Meisner during the seventeen years I worked with him. He was a brilliant teacher, a brilliant theater man. He had three important attributes: a tremendous sense of truth, an inventive way of working with actors, and a great feeling and love for theatricality. In that way his temperament was different from Strasberg's. He was closer to Stella Adler, but I think much more technically precise than she. He was wonderful at process. It was really from him that I learned how important it is for actors to be taken through a specific series of steps, one at a time, and how each step is the basis for the next so that what an actor did yesterday becomes the foundation for what he does today. In this way the actor has a process for constantly developing and evolving his work. It's not scattered. It's a very particular method based on improvisation that is tremendously helpful.

I don't think of myself as an acting teacher in that I don't really give acting classes. I undertake the training of professional actors and I'm a specialist in actor training, not just somebody who conducts a class to give actors some helpful hints on how to improve their next performance. I'm not focused on that. I think that the only things that are teachable are fundamental principles, because every time an actor has a problem in a performance it always comes back to one of those

principles: either he's not listening or he doesn't know why he's there or he doesn't understand the relationship between himself and the other person or he's acting his emotions and not really leaving himself alone.

The moment an actor starts to work he has the problem of what to do about the text because the text can easily corrupt him. If someone can memorize lines and talk, you might think that he is acting when, in fact, he may be doing nothing more than saying lines. So in order to get clear about what happens in acting, it's a good idea to get rid of the text temporarily. That means improvising. But improvising brings its own difficulties. The moment you take the text away from an actor he'll start writing dialogue himself. So often a lot of improvisation work is not very helpful to the actor because he starts making up dialogue or ad libbing his way through a situation. Instead of being in the situation, he's thinking of what to say. That's not helpful because when you play a part you don't have to think of what to say. You know your lines. Someone has written them for you, you have memorized them, and they are right there. You don't have to make up your own dialogue.

I base my first year's work on Meisner's form of improvisation. We start with this Repetition Exercise. Two actors stand on stage facing each other. One says something-makes an observation about the other. It may be about what the other actor is wearing or something else that catches his interest. Then his partner repeats everything he hears the other say. For example, one student may say to another, "That's a very nice green shirt." If that makes the actor wearing the green shirt feel good, he might say, "That's a very nice green shirt" back, but it will be colored by his good feelings. Repeating everything creates a dialogue substitute because the other person is always giving you your line. You hear what the other person says and that's your line. You repeat it from your point of view, keep repeating the same word or sentence, and only change what you say how you say it when you feel the impulse to do so.

### **What do you mean by "point of view"?**

How you feel at that moment. That's a very important issue in the development of an acting artist. It's vital, and that is a major area of work in the first year of training. A lot of people who come to study acting are very disconnected from themselves even though they may have acted a lot. They tend to be depersonalized and they don't know how to respond subjectively, from themselves. That's not good for an artist because the raw material an artist works with is how he feels about everything. Ultimately, every moment in a performance is made up of how the actor feels about that moment. But before an actor can get to that he has to get closely attuned to his own personal feelings about everything under the sun.

### **How would you summarize the purpose and goal of the Repetition Exercise?**

The first thing this exercise does is help actors learn how to listen. That's the bottom line in acting. You have to start by listening, and through listening comes the beginning of contact. The beginning of real contact between actors comes when they really listen to what they are saying to each other, and then really respond truthfully from themselves, from their own point of view. Because they have to repeat everything, they've got to listen or they can't do the exercise. So it forces them into contact immediately and into really listening to each other.

The Repetition Exercise is not a complete exercise in itself. It is the beginning of the work. It lays the groundwork for what is eventually a very sophisticated kind of improvisational exercise that ultimately trains the actor to do and live truthfully under imaginary circumstances. It does several things immediately: it forces the actor to listen, forces him to put his attention on the other actor and off himself; and teaches him to work impulsively and spontaneously and to be able to respond emotionally and not intellectually.

Without spontaneity acting is like soup without salt: it's stale, flat, and completely unprofitable. Plus an actor will never develop an attractive personality because spontaneity has an awful lot to do with stage charm-if you have some charm to begin with. Just as in life, people who are not spontaneous are very boring. Those who are spontaneous are very charming. It's a delightful trait. And only when you're spontaneous does the real person begin to emerge, not the person you think you are, but the one you really are. You have to do a lot of work tricking the actor into being spontaneous so you can see who he really is and give him a chance to find himself. The truth of someone is in his spontaneous responses, not his edited ones.

### **How does the Repetition Exercise progress?**

The next step in the Repetition Exercise can only be described as a kind of Ping-Pong game of impulses in which actors are bouncing spontaneous impulses off each other. Again, there are two actors on stage facing each other and one starts with a personal observation about the other; for instance, "You have a pretty sweater on." The two actors may initially repeat that sentence thirty times to each other. Then something will happen inside of them-an impulse to change will occur from the sheer repetitiveness of this sentence-and it will produce an impulse in one actor to change. He may say, "All right, so I've got a pretty sweater on. So what? Okay, okay!" Meaning, that's enough of that sentence. Through this exercise actors begin to learn how to sense an impulse and act on it. The actor's repetition of the sentence always adjusts to the truthfulness of his impulse. If it means that he has to change the words in the repetition in order to keep his answer an honest one, he does that.

The next step in this exercise has to do with behavior. The actor starts responding not just to the words being said but also the behavior of the other person. Now it is no longer a question of what the person is saying, but what he means. One actor may say to his partner, "Gee, that's a nice sweater." His partner may answer, "Well, I'm sorry you don't like it," because the first actor's intonation made him feel that he didn't really like the sweater. As students become more sensitized and hear more of what is really being said, they change the sentence being repeated more frequently and become more aware of what is happening in the other person's behavior. As they become more responsive, the repetition gradually becomes more flexible. Then you may have two students repeating sentences to each other that will change after every three or four repetitions.

So now you have the actor working off his partner's behavior and things begin to pop up in the repetition that are a response to behavior, like, "What are you laughing about?" or "Why are you getting so serious?" Now they are in very close contact, and they work harder to hear not just what they are saying, but what they mean. When they begin the Repetition Exercise their exchanges may go back and forth twenty times before something happens to make a change in

the words. As they keep working it gets more and more flexible so that a change in the sentence they are repeating will occur with more frequency. Eventually the repetition falls away altogether and the actors work directly off each other's subtext in each moment. At this point it's important that all excess verbalizations come out of the exercise.

You see, the tendency that actors have is to make conversation, and that will interfere with their emotionality because they can't think and feel at the same time. An actor has to be rooted in his feelings. The least important aspect of an actor's instrument is his mind. It's much more important that he have an understanding heart, an ability to empathize with other human beings, an ability to respond with his feelings, not with his head. That's what makes an actor.

A lot of great actors can't articulate or communicate how they do it, and they would make terrible teachers. I understand that Alfred Lunt was like that. He was a great actor, but when he directed he couldn't communicate. He would only know how to show you how he would do it himself. Teaching is a special gift. Not only do you need an insight into what is going on in a talented person, but you need the ability to articulate it so that someone else can understand it.

After about four or five classes of using the Repetition Exercise I introduce a task called an Independent Activity. This is an addition to the Repetition Exercise. A good Independent Activity has to have three elements: it has to be difficult to execute; there has to be a concrete, specific, and ultimately personal reason the actor is doing it; and it has to have reasonable immediacy-which means that the actor says to himself, "What is the least amount of time in which I would reasonably be able to complete this task?" All of this is, of course, imaginary, but must be taken as a reality.

Students do this kind of concrete task with concrete objects while they are doing the Repetition Exercise. One student may be mending a broken plate, fixing a clock, copying a drawing, making something out of clay-some task that is very difficult and complicated to do so that it forces the actor to use every drop of his concentration in order to complete it. The actor is forced to deepen his concentration on the object, which ties up his conscious mind so that he can't think about anything else except the activity in which he is engaged. At the same time, he has to keep responding repetitively to each moment that comes from his partner.

You now have one actor struggling with a mound of clay or trying to mend a broken clock while he is responding to his partner's sentence, both the way it's said and what is being said. And how a sentence is repeated is influenced by the person's behavior as he works on his Independent Activity, and his partner is responding moment by moment to the behavior created in the other actor by his task.

Then I introduce a time limit. I tell the student who is working on the Independent Activity that he has to complete the task while he is engaged in the Repetition Exercise within a certain amount of time; i.e., to fix the clock in an hour. This adds urgency.

One of the most important things that the Independent Activity brings to the actor's attention is the whole question of justification. Why is it important that I fix this clock within an hour? This is a major area in the training of the actor and one that I think is not fully understood in a lot of

the training that goes on. It isn't until the actor asks himself why he is doing this that his creativity begins to operate. Here you begin to tap into the real use of the actor's imagination. This is another important part of the training because all of the training is based on the use of the dramatic imagination.

A good Independent Activity has an element of struggle in it. Now you have an actor trying to get this damn thing done, whatever it is, and, without the actor even knowing it, he's upset. The emotion that comes out of that has a wonderful quality because it's not just a question of getting the actor to come alive. Everybody wants an emotionally alive actor. The emotion has a wonderful quality because the actor has not become "emotion conscious." One of the worst things that can happen to an actor is for him to become an emotionally self-conscious actor who concentrates on what he is feeling and tries to manufacture the feeling. That's no good. He must be involved in what he is doing. And if he knows why he's doing it and the reason has meaning for him, he will come to a full emotional life.

This brings us back to the important notion of justification. This is where wish fulfillment or fantasies come into the training because now the actor who is engaged in the Independent Activity has to endow the object with something important to him. Perhaps he decides that if he repairs this clock he can sell it for a lot of money and then go on a vacation to the Bahamas. He brings that desire into the work. It must be a total fantasy, but at the same time have real meaning for him as a person.

Now we begin to get into the actor's wants and desires. The actor has to make his need to complete the Independent Activity stronger and stronger. Let's say an actress wants to finish making a clay pot because she wants to sell it in order to buy a terrific cocktail dress that she knows is going to make her look like a million bucks. Or an actor may want the money to go see his dying father. Students have to come up with justifications for completing the Independent Activity that are more and more personal and urgent.

While the actor continues the exercise I give another actor-one who doesn't have an Independent Activity-a simple objective to carry out with respect to the actor in the exercise. For instance, he wants to borrow fifty dollars. And I have him come to the door while his partner is engaged in his urgent Independent Activity.

### **How is this carried out within the Repetition Exercise?**

Let's say one actor has a simple objective, to come to the door, and he knocks playfully-dum di di dum dum, dum dum. The actor opening the door will use that knock as a point of departure. He might say, "What are you kidding around for?" or if he can't get a sentence from the knock, he might use some behavior that he observes, like "Gee, you look cold." There is never manufactured dialogue. The dialogue in these improvisations (which incorporate the Repetition Exercise) always has to come from an actor's personal response to what exists in the moment. And the exercise or improvisation can go in a lot of different directions.

At this point in the training I hammer home an important principle of Sandy Meisner, one that is at the core of his work: what you do doesn't depend on you, but on what the other actor does to you. You can't do anything unless the other actor does something to make you do it. This means that the objective must be left alone, and all the actor's concentration must be focused on the other fellow's behavior and how he feels about it moment by moment. It is terribly important that the actor play off what exists in each moment and not begin to manipulate himself because of the objective. Later the objective is activated by emotional preparations.

### **How do you bring the Repetition Exercise into scene work?**

The first scene a student works on is always a simple conflict scene. I assign scenes to students that are usually from terrible plays like *Tomorrow the World* or *On Whitman Avenue*. The scenes are based on a simple conflict with two opposing points of view.

Then the actors memorize a scene by rote. In the first year of training we memorize all the text we work on by rote. The purpose is to focus the actor's whole attention on what his acting partner is doing and not on remembering his lines.

When students do a scene, they have not worked out any moments. The interpretation of the scene is a result of two actors working off each other's behavior, out of their moment-to-moment behavior. I don't want them to do the scene. I want them to let the scene do them. All a student may know about the scene is where he is and why he is there. He will eventually learn about his relationships. Then he works off his acting partner spontaneously. This ability to improvise with a memorized text is crucial. You have to develop a strong feel for this in the actor. There is a great deal of work in our theater today for which an ability to improvise with the text is vital.

This ability is the basis for cold readings. And it's also the key to television and film work, where improvisation, not rehearsal, is important. Rehearsal is a theater concept, and you can't train an actor to work only in the theater.

When a student is working on a scene, instead of answering what his acting partner says or expressing what he feels is being said, he must answer using the words of the text he has memorized so he doesn't have to think about what to say. He already has the lines. The point is that the student has to answer before he adjusts himself or thinks about the line of dialogue, so that he is responding from a spontaneous impulse. This is where the teacher has to have a good eye to catch it and say, "You see, in this moment you didn't pick up on your impulse."

That's what I mean by "improvising" in a scene with the text. The student is working off his spontaneous impulses all the time and the text is coming to the surface off his impulses. He is responding in the moment using the text but, at this stage, he doesn't consider if it's right for the character or if it's right for the play. For the time being, the student ignores these considerations because he is trying to establish a way to work from himself and with himself. A good actor adjusts his text to his subtext, what's really going on inside him. You have to break the actor's conventional response to text. Most actors tend to be conventional about text and have to be broken of that habit. I try to rid them of that conventionality. At this point I don't want the actor to try to solve the interpretive problems of the scene. That comes later.

The next step in the training is learning Emotional Preparations.

### **Is that different from prior circumstances?**

Yes, in a way. It's the way the actor relates himself emotionally to the prior circumstances. Let's say the actor is doing a scene and ten lines into the scene his stage wife says to him, "What are you so happy about?" His line is, "Honey, you are looking at the new vice president of the Crocketsville National Bank." The audience then thinks, "So, that's why the actor was so happy." Emotional Preparation is what the actor does offstage to bring himself alive so that he is emotionally related to his prior circumstances when he comes to the first moment, the moment of his entrance.

### **How do you teach students to do Emotional Preparations?**

Through daydreaming. We daydream in life when something triggers it, and we drift off spontaneously. It isn't a question of imagining something, but of actually daydreaming about it, which means living out a scenario. The actor has to go into that drift condition because it is then that the conscious mind relaxes and the unconscious starts to open up.

One of the things that the actor has to learn is the difference between daydreaming about something and thinking about it. There's a difference between thinking about making love to someone and daydreaming that you are doing it. Daydreaming is much more evocative.

### **How is daydreaming used in Emotional Preparation?**

I tell a student to sit down quietly and give himself a topic and start to daydream about it. For instance, I might say, "You're emperor of the world," or "You're a star," or "You're going to die," or "Daydream about the worst thing in the world that could happen to you." It's very freeing for an actor to do this because he is not locked into what has actually happened to him. I feel very strongly about that. It isn't a question of what did happen, but what might happen, what could be—not the most frightening or wonderful thing that did happen to you, but what could happen. Once an actor says what could be, he can start to daydream.

### **What instruction do you give students to help them develop this facility?**

I start by telling the actor to relax and I may give him a topic to start from, but then he has to let it go if other associations come up. Let's say a daydream starts about an agent who has rejected you. Then it goes to a policeman beating up a bum and you find yourself getting into the middle of it, getting into a fight with the policeman. This kind of daydream may come to the surface in someone who is very sensitive to authority. The policeman may suddenly change into your father, with you having an argument with him. And then you come to and you are in a rage, and that's when you come on stage if that's what you need to fulfill the circumstances of that particular scene. Of course it takes a very long time for the actor to use it with confidence. It is one of the most delicate areas in acting and one that demands great vigilance from the teacher so that the actor does not end up acting emotion.

### **How is this different from an Affective Memory?**

Affective memory means going back to a past experience, and I think it has a lot of problems. First of all, you have to teach the actor to do an Affective Memory. You don't have to teach anyone how to daydream. Next, you often run into a lot of resistance with an Affective Memory because the actor may not want to go back to it. It also makes acting a very dreary thing. You can't keep going back to re-create your mother's funeral for thirty years. That's not healthy, it's not good for the actor. And you don't need to do it either, because when your mother died it created an area of sensitivity to loss in you and that's what you need-that area of sensitivity. Then any daydream that plays on loss, losing something precious to you, is going to emotionalize you. And when you get tired of one daydream, you can invent another. Your mother's funeral will wear out as a source of emotionality after a while, but you can invent a million daydreams.

You know there are just so many emotions that human beings are capable of: fear, anger, pain, joy, humiliation. And joy is joy is joy, and pain is pain is pain. It doesn't matter where it originates because once it's alive in the actor it's easy to relate it to the circumstances of the scene.

### **Do you encourage students to reveal their daydreams as part of the process of learning how to do it?**

No. They never divulge their daydreams. They never share them. Daydreams are too personal. First of all, to talk about them is not going to be helpful to the actor. One man's daydream is another man's bore. Second, daydreams come out of the unconscious, so they are often very crude and ugly. People will often daydream things that they would never do in real life, things they would never act out. If the actor reveals those things, he starts to worry about what people will think about him. As long as the daydream brings the actor to life, it doesn't matter where he got it from. As long as he is alive when he walks out on stage, nobody cares where it came from. Then, of course, he must leave his emotion alone and respond fully and openly to whatever his partner's behavior means to him. The danger is that the actor will try to hold on to his emotion.

### **What is the next stage of the training?**

Next we work on improvisations and scenes that have prior given circumstances and require Emotional Preparations. Now we are at another level. Students are working off each other in a very intense emotional way and we bring in emotional relationships. For example, we will do an improvisation in which a woman is home and opens the door to the man who walked off and left her when she was pregnant two years ago.

Next I set up circumstances in an improvisation that are common to both students. In the above example, the man might be coming back because he realizes that he was a fool, that the woman he went off with was a real bitch, and that he truly loved the one he left. This is a whole other level from those earlier simple improvisations when an actor's objective might be simply to borrow a car to go on a date. In this way the actor is learning how to live truthfully under imaginary circumstances, and he is ready to work on more demanding scenes.

During the whole first year of Meisner's work students are developing a truthful instrument and it all has to do with straight acting, the actor being himself in the imaginary world, working with his real responses to what is happening. The actor is the character. Students are substituting themselves for the character. There is no character work at all during the first year. That comes later.

At the end of the first year you have an actor who is very good at being himself and has a strong sense of who he is, a strong sense of truth, and a good ability to live truthfully in the imaginary world. He is able to promote real spontaneity in himself and will act off his real impulses all the time. He can't help working off other people's behavior because he is so sensitized and has done it so much and he is always working with his real feelings. You have an actor who has a developed imagination and can invent very personal justifications to make himself do almost anything under the sun. He knows how to make himself do almost anything under the sun. He knows how to work with objectives and leave them alone and how to focus on the other person and work off him or her, always adjusting the text to what's happening at the moment between him and the other person, and not the other way around. You have an actor who is able to take a text and improvise it, identify the prior circumstances very quickly, ask himself, "How do I or the character feel about them?" or "How do I think the character feels about them? What does the text tell me about what the character feels about them?" then he can create, push the button and find the emotional life in himself, connect himself with it emotionally, and then walk into contact, absolutely relaxed, leave himself alone and live it out off the other person from unanticipated moment to unanticipated moment. If you looked at the scene being played you would swear it was real life. That's what you have at the end of the first year.

### **How do you help students develop a character?**

We begin the second year's training by using the improvisational technique and asking the student to play himself but to pick one addition to his behavior, such as a limp, a speech impediment, a dialect - one element that is different from himself. At this point he is not using a text, just improvising situations. Now it's the actor still being himself but with the addition of a lisp or a sprained ankle, etc. That allows us to begin to work on the physical or sensory adjustments of a character. And we begin to do sensory work on heat and cold. I've also begun to experiment with exercises where the actor will take a point of view that is not his own.

### **Could you describe that?**

For instance, I set up an improvisational situation in which one person owes another a lot of money and hasn't paid it back. The one who owes money may take the point of view that it's only money, how can this other guy possibly get upset over something as insignificant as \$1,000? And anyway, if I had it, I would lend it - but I don't have it. I can't pay it back. I'd have to get a job to do that, and he couldn't possibly want me to do that. That situation gets the actor to take on a point of view that isn't his. That's a very important ingredient in acting and in character work. A person who has that kind of point of view about owing money is a specific kind of character.

The criterion for choosing a point of view is that it has to be something that is humanly true, that is life as it is lived by most people (not eccentric or crazy people). You may have a character who believes that stealing is not wrong, or one who gets upset over losing a small amount of money. They can both be characters.

Character work is very complicated. There are a number of ways to create a character. One way is out of the emotional life: a happy woman is a character; a depressed man is a character. An interesting question to ask about a character is what his or her point of view about life is. Some characters view life as an endless party; others have a very tragic sense of life that will color his responses. I am teaching the actor to play the emotional line of a character – so that everything is adjusted to the dominant thing that is going on inside the person. We will do that through the exercise work and take it into scenes like the scene in *Two for the Seesaw* in which Gittel has the ulcer attack. The character of Gittel has a physical adjustment. She has ulcers and is in pain. It's also a very good teaching tool for an actor to adjust all dialogue to the physical and emotional pain of the character. And if you throw in a dialect, you have a complete character.

### **Do you use animal exercises for character work?**

Sometimes, but it's important for the student to understand that he is not doing a literal animal, but a human being who has the characteristics of that animal. He is not a bear, but bearlike. It's dangerous to have student work on animals literally.

In animal work it's the behavior that counts. Camels are wonderful when you want to play a snobbish character because they really seem to be looking down at the world. Squirrels are good when you need to play someone who is very anxious. Certain kinds of dogs are good. In fact, when you get into style, you might say that style comes out of the theatricality of your ideas. I once directed the letterwriting scene from *The Country Wife* with the two actors playing a bulldog and a poodle. It worked very well because the actors' qualities were right for the choices. I had another actor do the same scene and he used the image of an old Model T Ford for the male character and that worked well also. The more upset he became, the more he huffed and puffed like an old car. Now that's very theatrical.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. When an actor works on a character he has to work on making specific choices. That's the heart of the character work: making choices. There is a scene from a play called *Timelimit* in which a fellow comes in to be interrogated who has had a terrible experience the day before, one that was very painful for him. An actor might choose to enter the room as if it could be booby-trapped. He would then enter in a certain way and, using that choice, capture all the wariness and suspiciousness of that character.

In the first year of training students never really pick actions because they follow the principle, "I don't do anything except what the other actor makes me do"; therefore they do everything. But once the actor starts to work with interpretation he has to be more conscious of what he is doing; he has to be able to translate text into choices-things to do, actions.

### **What do you mean by actions?**

To tell a joke is an action, to teach somebody, to flirt, to introduce oneself, to give somebody an order. A great deal of the second year of training is spent developing the students' understanding of actions, intentions and objectives. The other part is learning that although most human beings do the same things, what distinguished one from another is how he or she does it. For instance, a priest and a gangster may both give warnings to a person. The difference is in how they give that warning.

What's really interesting is when a priest gives a warning the way a gangster would and vice versa.

Exactly. Then you get unexpected behavior and it becomes interesting for an actor to play a priest like a gangster and a gangster like a priest. Whenever an actor can find a way to go against the text he or she can make a big impression.

### **Do you recommend that students do that?**

Sure. Good actors will always find things to act that are not in the text. You never really want to play the text. That's the point, to my mind. That's the point of Strasberg's sensory work: you never play the text. You play the heat and the cold or the ice cream you were eating.

And I don't believe you can go into period work until you've created a very sound, solid, truthful actor. If you do it before that, you'll have a disaster. It's like juggling. It's okay to juggle three balls, but then you have to juggle, four, five, six. You have to work your way up to that.

It's difficult to do period work in New York studios because I'm not in the position to impose voice, speech and movement on the actor. Even though I have colleagues I've worked with for a long time and I implore students to work with them, they are not all going to do it. At Rutgers I can.

### **Do you follow the same course of training at Rutgers?**

For the first two years at Rutgers the training is the same process as my private classes. But on the MFA level, the whole third year is devoted to style. I start with Victorian-Ewardian plays - Shaw and Wilde because they are more accessible. Then I move on to Restoration and Moliere and Shakespeare.

### **You encourage your students to use the circumstances of the character. Do you ever encourage them to substitute events from their personal lives?**

I don't believe in substitutions. I'm against them because they divide an actor. Substitutions are what gave Method acting a bad name. You get two actors on stage and they are not relating to each other; they are trying to see someone else in each other's faces because they are working on substitutions. You get very absentminded behavior that way, as if someone isn't quite there.

When an actor uses substitutions, he must always find his own personal justifications for what he is doing and he will very seldom find that they agree with the text.

But you said justification involves using something from your own experience that is similar to that of the character you are playing.

I do teach actors to personalize, and most legitimate teachers will. Personalizations are those personal examples that an actor will use to illuminate some aspect of his performance. In the example I gave of an actor using a booby trap, that's an "as if." The actor is making a comparison between something in the scene that is not very well understood and something he does understand.

**Do you give students these "as if" situations, or do you ask them to find them for themselves?**

I ask them to ask themselves, "What is my personalization for this moment? What is this like?"

Personalizations can be drawn from the actor's own life. If an actress is playing a scene in which her husband leaves her, it might occur to her that it's just like the time when she was eight years old and her father left and she watched him go out the door. It's the same thing. But the important thing to understand is that once the actor gets the personalization he or she must take the behavior from it and throw the personalization away. She can't stand there thinking about her father leaving. Once she's found that for herself it's like a nut. The meat of the nut is the behavior and she extracts it and throws the shell away. In a substitution the actor goes onstage with it and tries to hang on to it.

One of the big keys is the question of meaning. I never train the actor to think literally, but essentially. It's never the facts; it's what they mean to him. It's not a question of what is true, but of the association of the meaning. For example, let's say I'm working on a scene in which I get a big promotion at work. Perhaps I can't personally relate to the kind of work that the character does, but I can relate to achievement, and that promotion is achievement. Then I can make my own associations with that because achievement is achievement is achievement. Once I make my personal associations they give living meaning to the text.

Another aspect of interpretive work in the second year is the problem of homework. How does the actor do it? He sits down with the script and daydreams through it. If he wants to take an hour to daydream around one moment, he takes that hour to explore it fully, find its meaning for him in terms of his own associations. It is very private and subjective work and if done correctly results in a kind of conditioning.

I remember when Paul Sorvino was in *That Championship Season*. That play has a problem in it. The first act ends right after Sorvino breaks the news to his friend that he's had an affair with his wife. The other fellow grabs a gun, points it at him, and says "I'm going to kill you." Then the curtain comes down for intermission, and when it comes up again it picks up where it left off. That's a real acting problem because the actor has to stay in the moment during the ten-minute intermission so that he can walk back on stage and still feel the same fear of dying. When I

talked to Paul about it he said that at the beginning of the run of the play he used to spend the entire intermission preparing to keep himself emotionally alive. After a while he became so conditioned that all he'd have to do was walk out in the dark and the emotion came up. He was conditioned. It was just there. That's what homework does, It's like doing a preparation over and over again until the emotion becomes so connected with the moment that it comes up by itself.

Stanislavsky said that the actor rehearses to make habits. First he decides what habits he wants to have, then he rehearses to acquire them, which means conditioning himself by doing it repeatedly until it's a habit. Then the whole performance becomes a habit. In the last phase of rehearsal you make all the habits beautiful. Ultimately, acting is also an aesthetic consideration. It has to look aesthetically pleasing. That's why someone pushing to summon up an emotion is not agreeable to watch on the stage. It's not aesthetic and it's not moving. It has to look as if it has just happened without any work showing.

### **Are there any areas in which you differ from Meisner in your teaching?**

I owe a tremendous debt to him. I find that by and large everything I learned from him enables me to do everything I want to do with the actor. I differ from him not so much in methodology as in classroom atmosphere. I think I am very good at creating an atmosphere of freedom. I agree that there has to be discipline and a great sense of purpose, but you also have to keep a climate of freedom so that actors can feel free to make mistakes and be willing to take risks.

At the same time you have to maintain a standard so that the best student can say, "I have contended with it and met it and I feel as I have really done something because I measured up to that standard. I know that his is the top so I can be confident that if I please Bill Esper or any other reputable teacher, I've got some genuine level of competence."

I also differ from Meisner in my serious concern with period and style. He was very interested in them and wonderfully good at period and style, but he didn't devote himself to them in the way I have. I've spent eight years working constantly in that area. My feeling has been that they are the most important frontier for American actors.

Putting together the real American-based Stanislavsky work to make a truthful actor and the ability to find a vivid theatrical way to express that inner reality- that's the whole ball of wax. You can't say that you are really serious about the art of acting unless you can test yourself against the classics.

You have to have a point of view about the art of acting and the theater. I'm a humanist and I go to the theater to learn something about human nature, some part of the world we live in. If the theater can't illuminate some aspect of life for me, I don't want to be there.