



DREAMWORK for Actors

Janet Sonenberg

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TO ANNA, ALICE, ANDREW,
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INTRODUCTION

Stanislavsky's techniques promise to bring the actor to the "threshold of the subconscious."¹ The depths of imagination lie there, beyond that portal. Stanislavsky's method (and the work of those who followed in his tradition, which includes me) assures actors of well-observed, truthful, and active performances en route to that font of unfettered "subconscious" acting. At the same time, it courts imagination and invites it to step through the door.

But what if we could explicitly contact the wild sea of imagination? What if we could forge links between the two worlds we know we

I. Stanislavsky referred to the unconscious as the "subconscious," as did French psychologist Theodule Ribot. Stanislavsky's initial psychological insights were derived from Ribot's writings (*Les maladies de la mémoire*, Paris: Librairie Germer Ballière 1881, and *Essai sur l'imagination créatrice* Paris, F. Alcan, 1900) which affected him deeply when he was in France. Inner objects, affective memory, the notion of faith, and objectives were all drawn from psychological ideas articulated in these books as aspects of memory and creativity.

live in: the everyday world of assigned meaning and the twenty-four-hour world of potent symbols, tidal relationships, impulses, and chaos? What if we could harness the boundless creativity of our dreams in our waking life? What if we could dream the character's dream?

We are all familiar with three kinds of imagination at work. Allow me to present you with my own model, which I use to explain the work that follows. The world of imagination is comprised of the reflexive, the constructive, and the autonomous imaginations. Uninspired, indicated acting utilizes the reflexive imagination. It provides the rote gestures, intonations, actions, and activities known all too well by the actor and the audience. It has no truck with the unknown because it furnishes consciousness with the well-worn stories we all know by heart. Operative on its own, it is capable of delivering only the prepackaged, clichéd performance of shallowly observed behavior.

The constructive imagination makes use of an actor's connection to the text via his conscious observations, memories, thoughts, and feelings. The actor matches the pattern of his experiences against those of the character. He then brings his intelligence and talent to bear on the imaginary situation by constructing a personally enmeshed, re-envisioned universe. Stanislavsky's conscious approach to the unconscious maximizes output from the constructive imagination. Actors working in this way create satisfying, embodied responses. The more observant, intelligent, and intuitive an actor is, the more life he's experienced and articulated in his being, the richer these constructs can be. A good performance develops a linear relationship between behavior and underlying emotion. These actors convey why something is happening and act on the implied question, "What does that make me want to do?" This, in turn, creates a new why, which creates a new what, and a reciprocal relationship of action and reaction develops from the first moment of a play to the last, all underscored by truthful emotion.

Recently, I watched Anthony Hopkins teach a pair of young professional actors doing act I, scene 2 of *Julius Caesar*. They understood the ambitions at play in the scene, but Hopkins reminded the Cassius and Brutus that this was not the Forum in the eternal summer of Hollywood epics, but that (backing up from the Ides of March) the chilling winds of winter blew across the open square. Hopkins whispered, “Seig heil! Seig heil! Seig heil!” evoking the crowd’s deafening support for Caesar, which resonated with the rise of another tyrant whose threat Hopkins knew from his own youthful experience. Hopkins stepped back to make associations between his own world and Brutus’s that were rooted in the text, two crystal-clear examples of constructive imagination.

Most people create by making use of the constructive imagination. We contrast and compare, analyze the data, filter it back through our own experience, and often succeed in making something new. I do not mean to say that the unconscious has no part in that experience. Something meshes the data and the actor and allows impulses to flow from the new information. But we are *courting* inspiration by conscious application of indirect, volitional actions. When pure inspiration strikes we experience a jarring impact—contact with the autonomous imagination. We have dipped into that realm and emerge with something wholly new.

The autonomous imagination is distinguished by its nonvolitional nature: “You can’t get there from here.” It is independent and generative; something emerges that did not consciously exist before its appearance. Even if it contains bits and orts of our conscious life, it erupts into our world altering the equilibrium of energy, injecting something that feels radically new. Although it may resemble what consciously mixing and matching experience to the text might have constructed, it is more suggestive, eloquent, and momentous. It is often nonlinear and symbolic rather than literal. The contents of the autonomous imagination are whole and precise, recognizable though

not necessarily immediately understandable. Their impeccable precision is so compelling, however, that our rational mind and all other imaginative faculties resign themselves immediately, or at least temporarily, to the force of a better idea.

Actors who transcend moment-to-moment reciprocity of action and reaction, who develop nonlinear associative dimensions in the relationship between emotion and behavior, often evoke autonomous imagination. (And it is these actors who have crossed the portal into Stanislavsky's "threshold of the subconscious.") We have all seen performances in which the actor and the audience find themselves in a territory they know fully but cannot explain. This great acting does not pacify; it is unsettling and demanding. In some fundamental way it refuses to answer conclusively the questions posed by the playwright. It *responds* instead. It is a present, living dialogue between the actor, the character, and the world. It does not ameliorate the anxiety of the audience (or the actor himself) but shows the choices they are making and disavowing at the same time. It goes further than cause and effect. The character reveals the sum total—at once—of his human desires and conflicts. He is an utterly human, expressive presence.

Great performances participate in all three kinds of imagination, for they are linked. If we think of imagination as the Earth, with the reflexive as the crust and the constructive as the mantle, then we can envision the autonomous as the core. Disruptions at tectonic plates, seismic activities, and releases of pressure from the core erupt magma to the surface and change the shape of the whole planet. In this way imagination is re-articulating itself, just as the Earth, in large measure, re-articulates its own geology. *Each manifestation is essential, each has its place, and all participate in the realization of a great performance.* So, while it is useful to think of imagination as having distinct levels, we cannot forget that they are part of an organic ecosystem—a world.

And the world they are a part of is our body-world. Imagination resides throughout the entirety of our bodies. Our work with actors

proves out that an embodied, sensory response is directly linked to an outpouring of imagination, and imagination is directly linked to an outpouring of sensation. Where else could imagination come from if not our bodies? My partner in this experiment, Robert Bosnak, calls it “the dreaming genius,” while humbly submitting that he does not know what that is. As for me? Perhaps imagination is inherent in everything. Perhaps it arises *ex nihilo*. But for the purposes of acting, it is more than useful to think of imagination as residing in a series of infinite regressions in every cell of our body.²

One cannot reject the reflexive imagination as inferior without doing damage to the autonomous imagination. And one cannot reach the autonomous imagination without traversing the reflexive and the constructive. The technique we developed using incubated dreams as a source touches on all three of these imaginative territories and gives each its due. It brings actors into proximity with the reflexive and the constructive imaginations en route to autonomous output, acknowledging them and using any richness that can be found there. The transactions among these three imaginative domains are like the tale of the Three Billy Goats Gruff. The troll under the bridge thinks he’s entering into a clever negotiation with each Billy Goat.

“I am going to eat you up,” roars the troll.

“Oh no! Do not eat me for I am the Littlest Billy Goat Gruff. Wait for my Medium sized brother, for he will be much more filling.”

“All right. You may pass.”

And over the bridge trots the Littlest Billy Goat Gruff. Of course, in the end, the third goat, the Big Billy Goat Gruff, kicks the troll into kingdom come, and all three brothers graze peacefully on the sweet

2. As an artist married to a scientist, whose dinner companions are often scientists, I shudder to think what they’ll feel when they read that imagination resides in every cell of our body. But I defend my statement that it is useful to *think* it does for the purposes of acting.

grass on the other side of the bridge. Why didn't the Biggest Billy Goat Gruff just come and kick the troll out in the first place? Because that's not the way the story is told, and it's not the story imagination has told us in our investigations. All three Billy Goats are required to encompass the tale, just as all three imaginative phenomena are required. And who is the troll in this story about imagination? The ego, of course, another imaginative by-product, the one that has to be booted into kingdom come if we are to get to the good, sweet grass on the other side of the bridge. But the troll is never, never killed.

Our experimentation provided an ironic twist on Stanislavsky's caveat *against* counting on the manifestation of the autonomous imagination. We found it relatively easy to arrive there, but unless the actors were prepared with a strong inner structure, the contents of the autonomous imagination were so potent that they flooded the whole. The lesson is: There is no easy way out. As appealing as it seemed to create solely from the wildest source, the actors' bodies were not ready to accept the torrent of imagination. This technique that allows actors to disembark directly on imagination's shores requires a sturdy vessel. With that secured, the actor can enter the flow and let it manage her.

Dreamwork for Actors offers a new acting technique that intentionally generates dreams on a play. They are the characters' dreams created out of the actors' raw material. From these we establish an energized network that becomes the characters' body. This dreamworking is a technique that "evokes brimstone," one that embodies the "physical knowledge of images and a means of inducing trances," a technique that finds an analogy in a theater gesture to the gesture made by the lava in a volcanic explosion.³ I will talk about the ecstatic qualities that the action of the dreams provokes on the actors and the

3. Antonin Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double*, trans. Mary Caroline Richards (New York: Grove, 1958), 80.

audience. I'll describe the steps we took, and our failures and successes en route to the development of a practicable technique. I will even analyze how and why it functions. But it finally remains as inexplicable as a dream.

CHAPTER ONE

Stories We Tell Ourselves

In some fundamental way, imagination's function is storytelling at its most majestic and minute levels. Or at least that's the story I tell myself.

We use imagination in life to explain life to ourselves. It arises in the form of regulatory structures, theorems, metaphors, and philosophies—all of them stories to help us picture the life we lead. The more lifelike the metaphor seems to a culture, the greater its currency. Thus, *www.com* captured the global imagination in the 1990s, as theater did in Renaissance England.

As a parent, and once a child, I experience the muscularity and sensitivity of storytelling. It is through these stories that our parents tell us our lives and provide imaginative constructs that enable us to succeed and fail. The obvious are the cautionary tale, or simply the word “boat.”¹ Even before we are able to create verbal narratives, the

1. Psychologist Arthur Roberts reminds us that the first stories we are told are through the medium of touch. These sensate stories initiate us into the erotic and emotionally contacted. They provide the possibility of safety,

acquisition of language is storytelling. We learn that the object on the water has an abstract identity other than its concrete being, and thus we begin our inculcation in the realm of symbol and metaphor. We are able to translate from one realm, the thing itself, to another, the word-symbol for the thing. This is the beginning of our comprehension that life is comprised of levels of meaning and experience. By the time we get told imaginative cautionary stories that further organize our experience, we are past masters of the form and we cannot get enough of them.²

All of us, to one degree or another, require organizing metaphors to make order out of the chaos and disorder of our passions. These metaphors are leaps of imagination that set us apart from any other species as sharply as the use of tools. Octavio Paz, in *The Double Flame; Love and Eroticism*, writes, "Imagination turns sex into ceremony and rite, and language into rhythm and metaphor. . . . The poetic image is an embrace of opposite realities, and rhyme a copulation of sounds; poetry eroticizes language and the world, because the operation is erotic to begin with."³ Meaningful sex is improbable without the converting action of imagination. Expressive language is impossible

love, and release from fear. An insufficiency or inappropriate kind of touching leads to emotional poverty, fear, and neuroses and, therefore, a very different imaginative construct about life and very inappropriate imaginings. It may explain a great deal about acting that these sensate stories precede verbal ones, for we have found that the coupling of physical sensation to words, experience, or memory is irradicable.

2. On a much deeper level, however, parents are helping children turn the wildness of sensation and emotion into words and metaphor, ripe for comprehension. Parents also may play imaginatively and tell stories that free children from the constraints of a world arriving fully imagined, and therefore static. The moment a child begins telling himself different imaginative stories than those shared by his parents is the moment of individuation.
3. Octavio Paz, *The Double Flame; Love and Eroticism*, trans. Helen Lane (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1996), 3.

without the converting action of imagination translating our desires and emotions. Meaning itself is not possible without imagination.

Of course, the kind of imaginative expressivity a theater audience is after depends on the collective story it desires to be told. In today's popular theater we crave magical realism. We believe that only a layer of truth is embedded in the conscious, "realistic" realm, and the Truth is found in the recondite unconscious. This reflects the psychoanalytic story many Westerners still tell themselves in the beginning of the twenty-first century, whereas Nietzsche, in *The Gay Science*, is clearly speaking about the audiences of his own time when he wrote the aphorism "Art and Nature."⁴

In nature passion is so poor on words, so embarrassed and all but mute; or when it finds words, so confused and irrational and ashamed of itself. . . . We have developed a need that we cannot satisfy in reality: to hear people in the most difficult situations speak well and at length. . . . The Greeks went far, very far in this respect—alarmingly far. Just as they made the stage as narrow as possible and denied themselves of any effects by means of deep backgrounds . . . they also deprived passion itself of any deep background and dictated to it a law of beautiful speeches. Indeed they did everything to counteract the elementary effect of images that might arouse fear and pity—for they did not want fear and pity. . . . [T]he Athenians went to the theater in order to hear beautiful speeches.

The impulse to convert that which shames and confuses us into flights of sentient words is still part of the human experience. We want, we need, imaginative stories to make sense of the mute, irrational aspects of our nature.

4. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), 134–135.

Imagination converts irrational social rules into acceptable stories. Here is one. When I was a child, Labor Day sharply set the demarcation between white shoes and colorful clothes and winter white and wool. This was a particularly shocking transition for Jewish kids whose mothers bought them new suits of thick wool, often quite lovely in my case, to wear to temple for the Jewish Holidays. Rosh Hashanah came when it did, sometimes as early as the second week in September when it was not autumn, but the height of summer's heat and humidity. One year my mother bought me a fantastic wool suit of black and white herringbone, a fashion-forward mini-skirt and jacket and a vivid yellow wool long-sleeved turtleneck. It was fabulous, but very, very hot. My brother and I donned our new clothes with trepidation. Out the front door we went as a family, pausing for the traditional family photograph. "The Jewish Holidays are early this year," said *every* Jewish father to every Jewish mother. And *every* Jewish mother responded, "It's unseasonably warm." Now, there was nothing unseasonable about it. It was the apogee of summer, 90 degrees in the shade and climbing, 86 percent humidity—and it was like this year in and year out. But the story our parents told each other (and us) was that the Holidays snuck up on us like bandits, robbing us of proper summer clothes. That was the terrific leap of imagination that justified thick wool. "It's unseasonably warm." It seemed to work for the parents. I cannot say the same for us kids.

Recently I read an article on annulments in the Catholic Church. An annulment is the equivalent of saying, "This marriage did not exist." Since marriage is seen as a contract with God, and a contract with God *cannot* be broken, then to sever such a bond, it must be that it (a real marriage) *never* existed, ergo an annulment. What imaginative story is more profound than pure denial: this event simply did not happen. While it is difficult to comprehend the denial of daily reality of a marriage, I finally understood what story the church told its faithful and what imaginative leap it required. If this imaginative

story does not resonate with the listener, he or she will naturally struggle with the concept.

Imaginative stories are the *sine qua non* of our ability to understand the world, much less our shifting selves. The stories given to us by the autonomous imagination are invariably lifelike and precise, although often challenging. Michel de Montaigne tells a wonderful story about impermanence in his essay "Of Repentance." He writes, "I do not portray being: I portray passing . . . My history needs to be adapted to the moment . . . I may indeed contradict myself now and then; but truth, as Demades said, I do not contradict."⁵ Shakespeare has Hamlet tell much the same story propelled by tragic circumstances, so the shocking story of impermanence must have been well and truly in the air the late sixteenth century. Did Montaigne's lively imaginative construct excite Shakespeare? It accounts for the blinding interaction among the past, present, and future. The present is just passing; observation itself alters the present and turns it into the future, and the interplay between man and his environment, or one another, changes us in every moment. Intelligent, observing people require a good imaginative story to cope with the slippery slopes of our ever-becoming selves.

Several years ago I was talking with a scientist friend of mine. He stated audaciously, "This thing you call rational thought doesn't exist. It's just a story about consciousness some people tell themselves. I never think." Although I wondered just who the "I" was who never thought, I was stunned. Now, I already knew my dirty little secret that I didn't think. I do something quite different than the commonly held model of discursive, linear thinking. But I had no idea that a scientist, capable of brilliant mathematical computations—in my estimation the hallmark of thinking—didn't think either.

5. Montaigne, *Selections from the Essays*, trans. Donald M. Frame (Illinois: AHM Publishing, 1973), 75.

It set me thinking, or whatever the equivalent is that I do. I realized that as a teacher of theater practice and as a director I do as follows: I read a playwright's text. She has already told herself a story so she can tell me a story, the play. In order to understand the play, I tell myself a series of stories. At that point, I tell stories to actors until they can tell themselves a story that connects to the playwright's and my own. They, in turn, tell the audience their stories that are constantly contacting the playwright's story, while at the same time the audience is telling itself stories that connect to every story down the line. What an amazing series of imaginative stories—when it works.

Of course there are other kinds of theaters telling quite different stories. Polish director Tadeusz Kantor's theater militated against the transferal of objects into metaphor. His actors' function was to be in a state of anomie in order for the playwright's words to manifest themselves. This is a story in itself!

An actor must tell an ageless story and fill it with newly envisioned variations on a hoary old theme. It will be his story of the story. If he is skilled and imaginative, these variations will delve beneath ornamentation and open a world of insight into character and the landscape of the play. Accomplishing this requires a good story to spring the imagination. A delightful story is one of imagination's greatest delicacies. Imagination tells us stories, *and at the same time* there is nothing that activates and then nurtures imagination's presence better than a good story.

This two-way principle applies to all acting techniques. They each have contained within them a narrative of some kind that catalyzes a fundamental difference in the way an actor experiences the world. Imagination then does what it always does—it creates its own story out of this newly generated experiential material. Imagination volleys back a story that corresponds precisely to the implied narrative in the technique being explored. So for example, if the tale an exercise tells is about contact between two people, the story imagination tells back to the actor is an interpersonal one.

The effectiveness of a technique is proportionate to how well the actor's imagination is captivated by its story. The better a technique is, the more it harnesses the themes human beings find endlessly interesting. However, a technique's fascination does not have to be immediately clear to be effective. Actual engagement in an exercise will lead to the creation of new information, which may reveal what the actor did not initially realize. He finds that he is comprised of more parts or more sensations than he ever suspected—that he is related to the world in ways previously unknown to him. This revelation will keep the actor focused for a protracted period of time, for it is a really good story with an unknown ending. And it simultaneously provides the actor with a productive haven during his time of not knowing.

The better an acting technique is, the clearer the actor's sense of *location*—where to go to get the good stuff—is. Inevitably this will be experienced physically. A good technique leads an actor to a solid sense that she will be able to find that place, that tangible boundary, and situate herself in relation to it so that information will unfold. The more physically conscious the process, the more reliable the results will be. The more conscious the actor is of sensing the boundary to be explored, the easier it is to get there. The boundary becomes an embodied place, not an abstract idea.⁶ All good acting techniques

6. Fritz Perls and Paul Goodman wrote at length about the contact boundary—that border between organism and environment at which all experience occurs. They make clear that subjectivity (where most of us place the phenomena of imagination) occurs neither within the organism nor outside of it, but always—and necessarily—at the boundary between the two. This boundary is a constantly changing organ that registers the difference between each of its sides, and is the site, neither it nor me, where awareness arises. What we take to be a fixed, inactive wall is in fact an extremely active membrane, always engaging in a multitude of transactions. Given acute attention, these transitions and transformations can be sensed in every moment. The best theater techniques sensitize an actor to these newly drawn boundaries.

define the boundary that is to be attended, and then grant the actor a structure in the form of a story that enables her to approach and dwell there.

Consider the most abstract object exercise; let's say an actor is "breaking down" a chair. This particular exercise comes from Teresa Ralli, a member of the Peruvian theater company Yuyachkani. Let us assume that the exercise has only one given: break down the chair only in terms of your physical relationship to it in space. The surface purpose of such an exercise is to find the many, many ways the actor relates to the object and the object relates to the actor. So, the actor's body is an object relating to this chair object. After the actor sits on, leans on, and stands on the chair, and finally runs out of ways in which he commonly relates to it with his everyday, reflexive imagination, the exercise begins to take on new dynamics. At first he remains a body and the chair remains an object (although not necessarily a chair) as he finds new ways to put his body under, over, and around the chair, and the chair over, under, and around his body. Later, he further abstracts both himself and the chair, and they begin to create a unity, with differing tensions and fluidly created shapes. The longer he works with slow intensity, the more images and sensations arise unbidden. The observant actor will perceive relationships, either potential or realized, that issue forth as he works.

The shift in awareness and the expansion of imagination that the actor experiences can be attributed to two important things. The first is the freshly drawn boundary drawn around the body and the object. When the actor releases his rigidly held idea of both himself and other, and his limited sense of "chair" and "my body," a new imagining space opens that embraces them both. The dialogue between actor and chair never stops, and new fantasies and stories are told in that intersecting space. They are not the stories he would have told himself earlier in the exercise, but are now filled with a remarkable

autonomous images and memories filled with tenderness and passion. Attention to the boundaries must be paid! By simply redrawing the field of perception great insights and newly discovered lands emerge at these points of contact.

Equally, or perhaps more importantly, the actor has fully identified with his body. He accepts that he is “just” a body in relationship to an object. He first gives up the shallow imaginative products of the reflexive imagination, and as he moves with his body in an unpressured way—there is no right or wrong—he discovers that consciousness suddenly resides throughout his body. His whole body becomes an imaginative realm. The body invites the presence of imagination, memory, and emotion, and continuing the exercise *as a body in space* sustains these subjective entities.⁷

Contrast this object exercise of Uta Hagen’s with Ralli’s. Each tells a story about the actor in relation to an object, but each draws a distinctly different boundary between or around the actor and that object. Here is Hagen’s superb object exercise to be undertaken by the actor playing Nina in *The Seagull*.⁸ She wisely suggests removing the character from the play’s crisis and placing her

7. But, if the body engenders and then supports their presences at the party then are they subjective? Are they solely the product of mind? Understanding fully that these questions frame whole fields of research and thought, that is, cognitive science, artificial intelligence, philosophy, and neuroscience, among others, I will only offer the evidence of theater’s experimentation. The craft of acting develops strategies and techniques for actors that seek to deconstruct the dualisms of mind and body, inner and outer, observer and doer, in order to act. We focus on the practical necessities of being alive in the moment onstage, and many techniques wholly succeed in unifying the actor in these aims. I often wonder, however, what the subtle, underlying significance of the actor’s craft has to say to these other disciplines?

8. Uta Hagen, *Respect for Acting* (New York: Macmillan, 1973), 137.

in her bedroom, preparing herself for an outing at the lake; the life of a landowner's daughter outside Moscow in the late 1800s. You must look for, and identify with, and make use of not only your [Nina's] clothing and underclothing, the details of your room (washbowls with pitcher and soap and heavy linen towels, the kind of bed and bedding, curtains, scrubbed flooring, icons, prayer habits), but also with what you read, what's forbidden or allowed. How do you write? By candlelight, kerosene, gaslight? If you write a note to Konstantin, on what kind of paper, with what kind of pen and ink, etc.? Then explore your specific task of getting ready for an outing.

Hagen's exercise places the boundary *between* the actor and object. She then asks the actor to remain conscious of usage and *to observe* carefully her transactions with the object. The final two movements in the exercise are identification—orienting the self with the object resulting in a close emotional association—and making use of all objects, permitted and forbidden. It is a formidable exercise, and a benchmark of the constructive approach. This detail is splendid, and an enormous challenge to any actor. Done thoroughly it will assure public privacy by growing an actor's feet down into the soil of the period, and into focused character behavior. When an observant actor rigorously attends the boundary between her self and objects, it yields up stories of Alençon lace delicacy. We do not often tell ourselves the story of delicacy in these days (and Chekhov in performance has suffered as a consequence). This exercise bestows personal reference, historicity, and their attendant behaviors to the performance.

The story the technique tells is to watch the transactions at the boundary between self and object. The story imagination rebounds is observational and behavioral; indeed a relationship can be brought into existence between self and object. You must observe and then identify with your observation, and finally use the object to fulfill the task. The technique is not designed, in itself, to take the actor into