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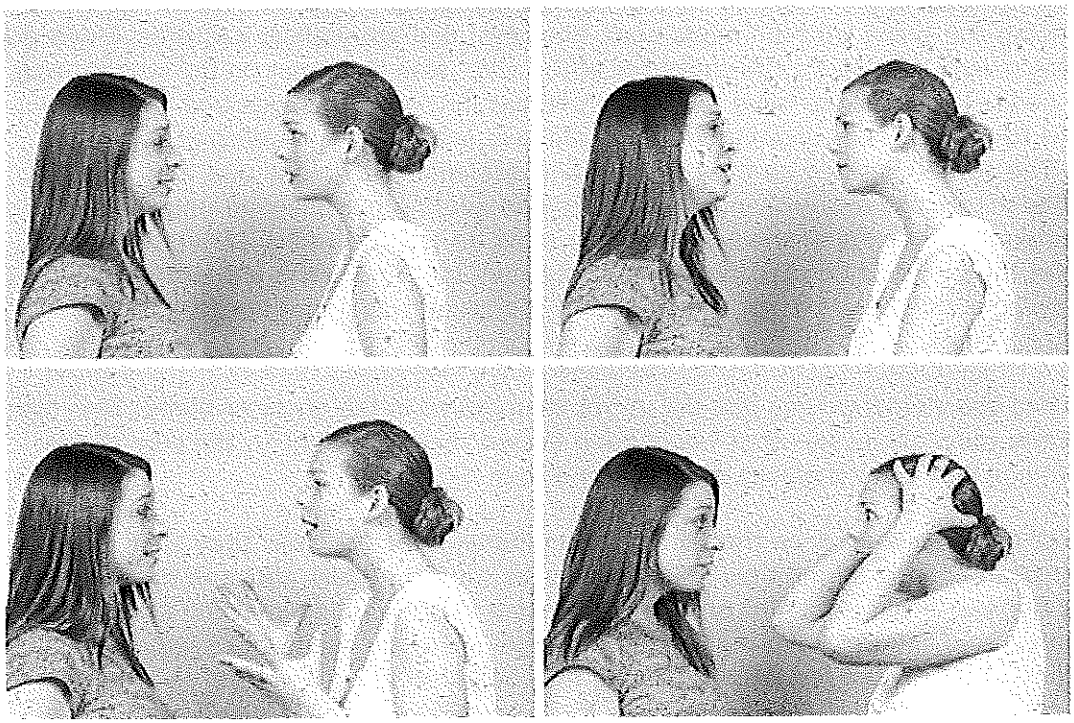
SHAPING LIVES THROUGH THEATRE EDUCATION

Listening and reacting

Telling a story through actions

By Bruce Miller



No matter how often I tell my students that acting is about telling the story of the play, too many of them are concerned with dialogue exclusively and forget that what they do is as important as what they say. Of course dialogue is an important part of the storytelling process, but it is only one of the tools necessary to get the story told. Too often students are focused on the words and themselves rather than on their scene partners. They cite their objectives and tactics and then fail to apply them to what is going on in the moment. They rely on the literal meaning of the dialogue rather than on its use in the context of the situation. As a result, they fail to find the story arc the playwright has provided.

Ultimately it is the moment-to-moment give and take that happens onstage between actors that makes the stories being told believable, fresh, surprising, and compelling. Yes, it is essential that actors be able to analyze a script and find the story it holds, but once the analysis and synthesis part is initiated and developed, the good actor must be able to trust that the fruit of his or her homework is present, and then focus on the moments as the scene unfolds. Being in the moment is a skill the best actors always possess, and it is a trait that we can and should work on in our classes. Here are some examples of what I'm talking about:

The other day, in a B.A. acting class, two of my students presented a first read from a cutting of a ten-minute play. The scene centered on a drug dealer and his would-be customer—a kid who is trying to buy a "roofie"

(slang for the date-rape drug, Rohypnol) because he's too inept to score with "chicks" on his own. Insulted by his customer's lack of ethics and disregard for fair play, the drug dealer decides to teach the young predator a lesson. During the course of the action the dealer slips the purchaser a dose of his own medicine and waits for the drug to kick in. While he's waiting, the drug dealer drops several hints to his victim about what's coming. He says things like "Pay attention, stupid," "In a moment you'll be powerless," and "I think I'll take you myself." The actor playing the would-be date rapist reacted to none of these statements. Nor did his character see the drug being dropped in his glass, though he couldn't possibly have missed it. Obviously, my two actors were not watching or listening to each other carefully—if at all. If they had, they would have played the scene differently.

In the first read for another scene, a stuck-up party girl unloads on the geeky guy trying to put the moves on her. She says things like "You're an idiot," "No one would want to be caught dead talking to you," and "You're an embarrassment, do you know that?" The actor playing the geek reacted to none of these statements. I tell my students all the time that unlike in life actors have the obligation to make what they do interesting. Even if the geek chose to ignore the girl, he still had to have heard her. Ignoring her would be an acting choice, not a matter of obliviousness. It was the actor, not the character, who failed to respond.

In another class, two students were putting a scene on its feet for the first time. They had created their set, brought in props, and were doing the scene with full movement, business, and storytelling gestures. I was glad to see a bottle of vodka sitting on the table since the character of the wife, who had been on the wagon, was now off it and feeling pretty good. The choice to have the vodka present in the scene suggested that these actors had thought about how to tell the story, even though the vodka is not specifically referred to in the dialogue or stage directions. The scene centered on the confrontation between the woman and her husband over her renewed drinking. The actors began the scene with the woman hearing her husband unlocking the front door. I expected that when she heard him, she would quickly move to put the vodka away somewhere. That didn't happen. Then when the husband entered the scene I expected him to see the bottle and react to it. The actor did not even acknowledge its presence. Yet the conflict of the scene was about her falling off the wagon.

These two actors were not using the elements they had set up for themselves in the physical scene. They were missing things—the vodka bottle most obviously—that would have helped them get right to the core of the conflict. Worse, these were things they gave themselves to use and then didn't!

There is an obvious disconnect between what is on the printed page and what actors think they should be focused on. I see this kind of phenomenon all the time in acting classes. Unfortunately, those in the audience have a much clearer view of the scene and therefore probably possess a better idea of what the story is about and where it should go. Young actors need to have that same skill—the ability to grasp what's important to a scene (and ultimately the story) and how the playwright expects it to be played.

In two other recent scenes that students in my freshman B.F.A. class were working on, sexual tension played the dominant role. In neither of these scenes is sex directly addressed. Yet in both, the sexual tension is so thick and ripe you could cut it with a butter knife. But the four actors reading these two scenes didn't grasp what was completely apparent to the class watching and listening. In the first scene, a former couple find themselves alone in her kitchen. The guy is trying to get back together with the girl. It is hot, the air conditioner is broken, and she is kneading bread. He joins her. They are standing right next to each other, their hands working the dough as he tells her how much he has missed her and how attractive she is. She tells him to move away. Instead, he pulls the hair away from her neck and gently blows on her skin—allegedly to cool her down. This stage direction is in the script, mind you.

In the other scene, a young man and woman are in the midst of a philosophical conversation. It becomes apparent that they are a former couple as well. Sounds innocent enough, right? But there is a wrinkle in the situation. The guy is shaving the girl's legs as they talk. It is something that they had talked about doing when they were together, but never did. In the scene, the guy actually asks the girl if he can do it now since he missed the opportunity when they were together. Surprisingly, she agrees to let him. This, of course, says something about the girl's current feelings toward the guy. The actors apparently missed this juicy point. Though the conversation they have is not sexual, the physical action obviously is.

In fact, in both scenes the implied sexual tension was blatantly apparent to those watching, but unfortunately, not to the actors actually doing the scene. They were too busy with the words to pay attention to what was going on between them. Ironically, in the dough kneading scene, the characters even acknowledge the sexual tension indirectly in the dialogue, but the actors were so busy with getting their words out that they were not really listening to each other. Amazingly, they missed the sexual innuendos that were clearly provided by the playwright both through the dialogue and situation itself. The same was true for the second scene. If these young actors missed these neon come-ons in their real lives, we'd think they were wearing blindfolds and earplugs.

Three kinds of listening

I offered the above examples because in different ways they each point to the need to teach our students the importance of learning the story of a play. Then we must show them how to tell the stories more effectively through their choice of actions. We also have to help our students learn to listen better on stage. I use the word listening, but it's not just referring to the ears. I mean listening—with all our senses—just like we do in life. In life we listen for nuance and inflection; we take in body language and the changing position of those who surround us. We get messages from distance and closeness. Touching often tells us far more than dialogue. We place dialogue in context; we look and listen for subtext. We chart our changing position of power, likeability, and esteem in our interpersonal transactions from moment-to-moment.

For the purposes of this article, I have divided the successful actor's listening skills into three categories. Each of them has already been implied or demonstrated in the examples I cited. But here they are again, more specifically explained:

1. **An actor must be able to listen to the script.** This kind of listening involves homework—taking the script home and reading it. From this work, the actor must be able to imagine the script's story and its potential for making moments—moments that come from reacting to new information, verbally or otherwise. Finding these moments will give the actor a head start when actually trying to listen in rehearsal.
2. **An actor listening on stage must be able to hear what an audience hears.** That means paying attention to what a scene partner is saying and the manner in which it's being said. This is no easy task. An actor's focus is easily distracted by the need to find lines, deliver them effectively, and remember blocking.
3. **An actor must be able to listen with all her senses to what's going on.** The third kind of listening is an extension of the second. An actor must be able to see, hear, and react to all the information being put out by a scene partner and the environment, not just to what is being communicated through dialogue.

Since most of you probably don't have extended time to spend on developing listening skills in your students, what follows are some basic exercises that might jump-start your actors into acquiring these traits on their own. Included are some suggestions for development in each of the three areas mentioned above.

Exercise one: Listening to the script

Ten-minute plays are a useful source for script work that will lead to better listening habits. The plays are brief, focused, frequently start at a climatic moment in a story, and offer a variety of genre and styles for analysis. Your students won't get bogged down by excessive length, complex character analysis, and detail too hard to remember and keep track of. You can do the following kind of exercises as a unit during which you really focus on these skills for a while, or you can assign an individual play and spend a limited amount of time. The activity will easily fill a class, and you can do to this sort of work with minimal preparation and maximum payoff.

Begin by selecting a play (preferably one with two characters to make it easier to partner up actors in the classroom) and ask your students to read it independently. When they have finished, ask them to tell the story of the play as briefly as possible either in a written paragraph or orally in class. Explain that the story should be told in terms of cause and effect (this happened, then this happened, then this happened, etc.). You will probably discover that they have a difficult time doing this without going off on tangents. The basic skill of

identifying the real story might seem too simple to bother with, but in fact it's very important that young actors know how to do this. Descriptive tangents might be interesting, but they can't be played. Actions can. Being able to isolate the action of a story succinctly will help your actors connect the dots of the play once they are trying to put it on its feet. In turn, knowing the sequence of a play's action will help your students listen for and define important storytelling moments as they occur.

Once your students can tell the story of the play in terms of its action, ask them to circle all the script's big news moments. These include discoveries, pieces of information that will change a character's perception of things, interruptions that affect the flow of the story, etc. These are all things that the actor will have to respond to and make choices about onstage. They are the little storytelling moments that make the progression of the play clear and define the characters your actors are playing. The sequential and cumulative fulfilling of these isolated moments is what brings a story to life for the audience and makes the actor look good. Produce three good moments, I like to tell my students, and the audience might think you're an actor.

After you have collected and agreed to the big moments of the scene, have a pair of students read the scene aloud. Before they begin, tell your actors to be sure to deliver the important news moments clearly, and to respond to the big moments that have been isolated. When your actors have finished, discuss their successes and failures. What worked, what didn't, and why? In all probability, the moments that worked really well were the ones that were physicalized specifically. Those that seemed unclear or non-existent were probably the ones where the actors had little or no physical response to what was being said. Your actors may want to argue that they did respond to what was being said, but the proof is in the audience, not in how they felt. If the audience didn't see the response or understand the response, the moment was unsuccessful, no matter how deeply the actors thought they were feeling. Remind your students that acting is done for the audience, not for their own gratification. It doesn't really matter what the actor feels, rather it's what the audience thinks an actors feels.

In my experience, today's teenagers tend to be physically non-demonstrative. In other words, they don't seem to use their bodies effectively. After you do this exercise, it might be useful to review how a play's story is structured. Look at its beginning, middle, and end. Every play's story sequence includes hearing the big news, processing the big news, and responding to the big news. The response and manner of the response both contribute to how the audience perceives the character and the moment. These responses cannot only be internal. The audience must be able to see what the character is thinking and feeling. This will only be accomplished when an actor can physicalize all three stages of an action: the beginning (hearing the news), the middle (processing that news), and the end (doing something as a result of the news).

As part of the discussion on beginnings, middles, and ends, it would be useful to do some basic exercises with your class that demonstrate how these elements shape a play's story. See 'An exercise in story structure' below for a series of one-line pieces of dialogue that make for good moments with beginnings, middles, and ends.

After the first pair of students presents the big moments of your selected scene from the ten-minute play, you may want to have your actors restage a few of the moments that were not fully successful the first time through, using the beginnings, middles, and ends model cited above. When you are satisfied with their progress, you can have another couple of actors do their versions of the same scene. If you work this way, the scenes will no doubt get stronger each time because you're watching students have the benefit of seeing the story unfolding in front of them—always easier than creating the story fresh from their own individual theatres of imagination.

There are a couple of variations you can do with this exercise. Here's one: Have your students volunteer to read the play for the first time aloud in class. If your class consists of less than spectacular readers, or students not disciplined enough to read in a focused manner, this might be a good alternative. Once the play has been read aloud, the exercise proceeds as described above.

Another variation is to have one student simply deliver a big moment line and have his partner respond to that line. Have the scene partner repeat this several times until it is a truly a full moment clearly defined through their physical actions—a moment with a beginning, middle, and end. When they have repeated the sequence several times, in all probability, they will both own the moment and be honestly listening.

The strength of this exercise is how it shows the students that isolating moments through planning and then

through listening in the moment makes good acting—acting that is believable, clear, and compelling. It also reinforces the idea that actors should break down their work into its smallest units and account for them. A good performance is built one brick at a time. The storytelling bricks are the isolated moments that are allowed to unfold clearly and cleanly. Listening in the moment is the mortar of a scene. It is what makes those moments unfold believably.

Exercise two: Listening in the moment

The late Sanford Meisner, one of this country's premiere acting teachers, created a series of terrific repetition games to help students learn how to listen in the moment. There are several excellent books describing his work. Meisner's own text, written with Dennis Longwell, or any of the books by Larry Silverberg can help you get started if you are interested in pursuing his time tested exercises.

There are, of course, other exercises as well. One I like to use is a repetition game that I stole from a colleague and then tinkered with a bit. I like it because it has so many easily arranged variations and clearly demonstrates several essential points about listening. Have your class sit in a circle where everyone can see each other. Tell your class that you will give a random person a piece of dialogue that he or she must repeat exactly—word for word, and consistent in melody, nuance, rhythm, tempo, word emphasis, etc. The phrase could be a line from Shakespeare or a famous aphorism, a bumper sticker slogan, or a song lyric—it doesn't matter. But however you say it to the first person, the next individual must try to repeat it exactly to the person next to him. The game continues with each person trying to repeat what was said by the first speaker. I might say something like, "Here's a weighty statement: The first fat person into the water will be the first to drown." Or "you can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him think." Or "Mr. Clean gets rid of dirt and grime and grease in just a minute." Or "Mr. Clean will steal your whole house, and everything that's in it."

In another round I might offer up a piece of dialogue that requires an emotional commitment. Something like, "I hate your guts, loser. You hurt me!" Or, "You mean everything to me, you know that?" And however I say it to the first person, it must be repeated exactly. This exercise requires a great deal of concentration and commitment, especially because there is no context. Each phrase offers up a different kind of challenge for the repeaters who follows.

Whatever the phrase, the first person will have to pass it on to the person either to her right or left as per your instruction. The phrase will continue one person to the next until it gets around the circle or until you stop the exercise. Tell the class to listen for when and where variation occurs. You may stop to point out changes or let it go for a while noting where and, if possible, why changes occur. Note them mentally or write them down for later discussion when the round is stopped or the phrase has been worn out. The game is much harder than it sounds. Your students will find it difficult to really listen. They will be busy trying to be funny, worrying about getting it right, being distracted by self-consciousness or by trying to remember the line, etc.

In a second variation of this game, tell your students to repeat exactly what the person before them says. If the person talking to them changes a word, an emphasis, the tempo, or melody in his delivery, it is their job to copy that exactly, not what was originally offered up by the first person. In other words, the phrase will evolve as it goes around the circle. When it is appropriate or necessary, you can stop the game for commentary and discussion on where, when, and how the listening was successful or less so.

Again, the game will prove to be surprisingly hard. You are likely to find that, if your students concentrate on the words, they will miss changes in emphasis, pitch, melody, or tempo. They may also miss much more obvious things like word changes, hard as that is to imagine. In fact, you will quickly discover that the listening skills of your students fall far short of what you might expect. Truthfully, that's just a reflection of society in general—people don't listen to each other very well. However successful or unsuccessful your class is at this exercise, use it to emphasize the importance and difficulty of listening on stage. It's hard enough just learning to listen in one's daily life; adding nerves, lines of dialogue, and blocking only adds to the potential distractions to our focus.

Here's one more challenge to add to our listening exercise. Once you think they're ready, tell your students to copy any body language that was used by the person who delivered the line to them. This will incorporate all their senses into the listening process, and likely to be amusing as well. Juggling listening to the words,

intonation, etc, along with a speaker's physicality is a real challenge. Success would be great, but compounding the game this way is more likely to simply further clarify the need for your students to understand how poorly they listen and how important learning to listen actually is.

Okay, now let's really challenge your students. In the ultimate version of this game, you bring in the third and most complex kind of listening—listening, then reacting, with all the senses.

Exercise three: Listening and reacting

In this variation of the listening game, present your students a variety of lines that feature a lot of emotional subtext. Deliver each with full physical commitment and with eye contact. Instruct the class to listen for beginnings, middles, and ends, so that they not only take in what is delivered to them, but react to it as well. Once they react to the giver, the listening receiver must then transition into giving the same line to the person sitting next to him or her. The line of dialogue can travel to the left or right, depending on your instruction. Each exchange should make for a completely realized moment—the smallest unit of storytelling on stage. It should have a beginning, middle, end, and a believable transition to a new beat as the receiver becomes the giver when the line of dialogue is passed along. By the way, that transition from receiver to giver is an actable moment and must be believable.

The game will go something like this: Choose two of your more skilled actors to begin, students you think can execute it convincingly. Have the first student say to the other, "You know, I have loved you from the first moment I saw you." As she says the line, she should take her partner's hand in her own. As her partner takes in the line, he should squeeze her hand in return and smile deeply. In transition, the second actor drops his partner's hand and slowly turns to the person on his left. He makes eye contact with the new player, creating a new relationship and a new story to be told. He then repeats the line he had been given in the previous exchange as he takes his new partner's hands. When that moment is completed the game continues to the left, each new couple making their moments.

If you do this exercise after trying the earlier ones, you will probably find that it's possible for your students to grasp it easier and more effectively than earlier variations. That means that each person will be allowed to make slight unintentional variations in what is said, how it is said, and how it is physicalized. Playing in this manner will ultimately be less frustrating because change will be inevitable. But the advantages of this version will give the non-players an opportunity to study how and why the evolutions occur and a chance to assess the effectiveness of the dialogue and physical changes that unfold. It will also allow each new pair to listen to each other without worrying about how the original acting moment was executed.

The transition from one actor pairing into the next is particularly interesting. As the listener transitions into being the giver, he or she will have to decide what of the previous exchange will be carried over into the new one. Does the previous relationship still exist and the new one trump the old? Or once the transition is completed, does only the new world exist? As the game unfolds, your actors will become aware of this difficulty. At the appropriate time, you might interrupt the flow of the game to discuss this very issue.

I've found it effective to play the game by instructing the class to dismiss the previous encounter and transition into a completely new world without the previous given circumstances—at least at the outset. Once your students get the hang of the game and make the transition successfully, then keeping the previous history will prove to be a fascinating challenge. If you work with a line like, "I love you very much," for instance, the receiver will have to take it in, make a choice about it, then transition into the giver. If she, as the receiver, had responded positively to her giver, then making the transition to giving the same news to someone else can prove to be difficult, but also hilarious. It is certainly good for developing listening and reacting muscles.

The truth is that a really good actor can make almost anything work on stage. The trick is getting the audience to believe it. And getting the audience onboard requires the actor to go through an intellectual and emotional process that the audience thinks it is seeing. That comes through a skillful use of listening and reacting physically in such a way that those physical actions represent any tangible subtext and emotion for the audience. Ultimately, this final round of the game includes all the essential in-the-moment skills that a good actor must develop.

If you have the time, go through the entire battery of exercises described above. If nothing else, your students should come away with a significantly improved sense of the importance of listening and storytelling that goes on between actors—storytelling that starts with the script, but gains a great deal in the actual telling. And that's just what interpretive artists are supposed to do. Ultimately, listening skills are something you can't really teach. You can't climb inside your actors and make them do it. But you can raise their awareness level, allow them to see for themselves how important good listening is. Then encourage them to develop their abilities. And if they're listening with all their senses, that is exactly what they'll do.

An exercise in story structure

Collect a series of one-line pieces of dialogue that will require a response. Read the line out loud to your students and have them respond physically with beginnings, middles, and ends. You can do this as a group exercise where all your students do the responding at the same time, or you can select individual students to come in front of the class and try responding as the class observes and analyzes. Or you can select several students to go in front of the class, and have them respond at the same time. The class can then decide who had the best moments and why. You get the idea. Below are some examples of lines that might make for good moments with beginnings, middles, and ends.

> Hey you, come here!
> The news isn't good; the cancer has returned.
> I love you.
> I know you took the money.
> I'm here to tell you you've won the Publisher's Clearinghouse Sweepstakes.
> You can have the car tonight.
> I saw Ginny kissing Matt.
> We're having liver for dinner.
> Rover was hit by a car.
> The doctor says the tumor is gone.
> —B.M.

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