

Be Here Now
by Jean Schiffman (the Craft)
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"Richard Seyd explains how being in the moment must be built into the rehearsal process."

"One of the best-kept secrets of acting is ... all actors lie to themselves and to others about how little they are truly in the moment." So says Los Angeles-based, longtime director and teacher Richard Seyd.

In a letter to the four actors he'd just cast in the current Berkeley Repertory Theatre production of Donald Marguiles' *Dinner with Friends*, Seyd elaborated: "Although everyone pays lip service to the phrase, no one ever gives actors the tools to allow them not to anticipate, not to have other thoughts floating around, not to have a critical voice - all the things that keep you from being present in each moment."

So, over time, Seyd devised a rehearsal method guaranteed to keep actors in the present. The goal is for actors - in this case, Lauren Lane, Lorri Holy, Dan Hiatt, and Bill Geisslinger - to learn the material while they are actually doing it. The result is a spontaneous, deeply felt performance in which the actors never anticipate; that is, they never in their minds jump ahead to the next lines or actions.

"The whole thing in American acting is to be in the moment," Seyd explained in a phone conversation. "But when you're aware of that, it takes you out of the moment" - a veritable *Catch-22*. "So you do exercises to get you back to that place: relaxation, concentration. It's easier to be in the moment on camera because you're not in front of a live audience. And if it doesn't work, you can shoot it again. But you don't get that luxury onstage." That anxiety is what causes actors to anticipate.

For starters, Seyd eliminated first read-throughs. "If you read through the whole play, your tendency is to start acting before you're ready," he explained. He also cautions his actors not to memorize any lines in advance - or, in fact, at all - nor to look for intentions, or objectives. All that will evolve organically in due course.

Seyd believes that everything you do and say onstage is triggered by a specific impulse. So, before that first rehearsal, actors go through the text, breaking down their lines into clumps of individually expressed thoughts (usually structured by the author's punctuation). They then choose a "trigger" or impulse for each separate thought. Triggers are what motivate each moment and cause the actor to speak / respond. "It has nothing to do with learning cues, in the sense of the last words before you respond," Seyd wrote in his letter to the actors in which he detailed his rehearsal method. "It is learning the content of what is expressed, the meaning that causes your response."

Initially determined on the most surface level, the triggers will change as rehearsals progress. An example of the most garden-variety trigger: Something somebody else says or does causes you to respond in a particular way. Seyd lists eight other common triggers in this letter to the actors, including subtext. But he cautions against choosing subtextual material as a trigger in your prep work. "Actors tend to load themselves with unnecessary subtext," he said.

The Lookup Read

Once in rehearsal, Seyd and cast discuss the backstory and then proceed to the "lookup read".

With script in lap, already marked with thoughts that need to be expressed (rather than lines highlighted), each actor listens carefully to what the other actor is giving him or her, thinks about what his or her response might be, looks down at the page to see what the lines actually are, and then looks up and delivers them. "Normally, you do table work, them blocking, all carrying scripts, then about three weeks in to the rehearsal process you look and discover the other actor," explained Seyd. "That's when the real work starts. I put them into contact the very first day. So the process of getting off book becomes an evolution. You don't know what's coming until the other actor gives it to you. It feels internally spontaneous each time."

You go through every moment of the play sequentially, never anticipating, never actually learning the lines by rote (but deepening your understanding of the character and circumstances) as you go. Eventually, as rehearsals progress, what you think your lines might be evolve in to what the lines indeed are. You will be unable to run your own lines independently, and you will lose that not-in-the-moment sensation of visualizing your lines on the page (an actor's plague that normally doesn't go away until weeks after opening).

Similarly, when actors have more than eight lines, or six separate thoughts in a row, they write each separate thought on a card.

"No monologue is a monologue," explained Seyd. "We're having a dialogue right now, but I'm doing most of the talking and you're going Uh-huh. As a scene in a play, it would be a 10-page monologue. Actors confronted with that would think they have a tremendous amount of work, and the audience would perceive it as a monologue approaching because that's how the actor is experiencing it. But when you see it as thoughts on cards, the actual process itself becomes a movement through time. This way, the actors never see the printed page [in their mind's eye]. If it just gives actors that, it's worth it.

Actors' Response

Does the method work? When cast member Lorri Holt, who plays the discombobulated would-be Beth, got Seyd's letter, she was initially offended. "Here I am in my late 40s, and I've worked so hard to cobble together my own approach that hopefully results most of the time in truthfulness," she told me a few days after opening, "and someone's trying to tell me how to act!" She also couldn't understand how deconstructing the text into discrete thoughts and finding what motivates each thought could possibly get her out of her head and into the moment.

But, said Holt, "It was incredibly liberating." She felt like she was flying. "The task becomes completely listening to other actors and not anticipating," she explained. "When you forget something, you're thinking, Why doesn't that come to me? And there's usually a reason. It was tremendously exciting and revealing." And, yes, she no longer visualized her lines on the page.

Dan Hiatt, who plays Gabe, said that when he got Seyd's letter, he was enthusiastic. "I've found lately in rehearsal I was getting so conscious of people in the rehearsal room, people watching, it was hard to be spontaneous," he told me. "With this technique, your focus is so much on other things, that [self-consciousness] disappears. You start slowly and talk about every single line to find those triggers. Ordinarily I would have been so much more conscious of where the laughs are going to come, and how to build them in." Instead, he found himself surprised when the audience laughed.

Like Holt, Hiatt is a longtime professional actor who'd developed a whole way of working. Ordinarily he would make a tape with his cues on it and play the tape until the lines were solid, using that as a base upon which to put everything else. "I've always wondered if this is really a good idea," he admitted. "I think you do get kind of surfacey that way."

He also used to run his lines while driving to the theater and said he couldn't do that now. "You have the first moment, and after that, you just trust that the trigger will happen." The lookup read, he said, is a completely inside-out way of learning the text.

Is he really able not to anticipate with this method? "Yes. In the best circumstances, you're really listening for that trigger, and until it comes you don't know what you're going to say."

The Upshot

Radical as this rehearsal approach may sound, I think it's a natural and logical extension of the classroom work most of us have done. Seyd swears that it's all feasible within today's stunted rehearsal periods. Nor do these techniques cancel out most of the basic, normal homework, which Seyd lists in his letter: "activating your imagination, day dreaming, thinking, and going over the scenes in order to understand them at a deeper level."

Final question: Can an actor use these techniques elsewhere? Seyd thinks the ideal is for a full ensemble to be working this way but said it's also a wonderful rehearsal technique for individual actors, both stage and film. His wife, stage and film actress, Maura Vincent, has been using the approach for three years, as have other actors. "Even though it's easier in film to go moment by moment," he pointed out, "the actors still do anticipate - it's endemic to the profession."

Hiatt, for his part, plans to carry over some of what he's learned, particularly the new way of working on monologues. He added, "It helps to have had experience. I don't think in my early years I would have understood what Seyd was after. And to give yourself over to this as an older actor can be hard. But a lot of work is still the same - it's a technique for getting the play on its feet in an organic way."

The proof is in the pudding: In *Dinner With Friends*, everyone appeared to be listening deeply and responding spontaneously. The cast, said Holt, is sad that the rehearsal process is over."