

Stretch Work

by Karen Kondazian (*The Actor's Way*)

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"In his teaching and his directing, Richard Seyd tries to put actors in touch with their infinite possibilities."

"In 1990, I performed in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* At Berkeley Repertory Theatre under a brilliant English director named Richard Seyd. Last year, I saw his extraordinary production of *A Streetcar Named Desire* at American Conservatory Theater in San Francisco, which was breathtaking in its sensuality, theatricality and humanity - the kind of experience that makes an audience understand the magic only theatre can summon.

Since then, Seyd has relocated to Los Angeles, and directed the recent production of Noel Coward's *Present Laughter* at the Pasadena Playhouse. His most recent production, *The Lion in the Winter*, starring Mariette Hartley and Tony Amendola at LaMirada Theatre for the Performing Arts, opens this weekend.

I interviewed Seyd in his charming home, which has all the signs of an artist in residence. We sat in his study and chatted about theatre, acting, and the classes he's begun teaching in Los Angeles.

BSW/D-L: As a youngster, did you start out wanting to act?

Richard Seyd: No. My theatre experience actually comes from my mother. From the age of six until I was 11, I lived in a village of about 400 people in the North of England. My mother started a theatre company there. She did pantomimes and plays that she wrote on various village issues. It was incredibly popular. People would come from neighboring villages all around.

It took until I was about 17 or 18 to realize that these shows had a very profound effect on me. I started doing theatre in high school and, like everyone else in 1968, I became very politicized. I went to drama school and then, along with some friends, we formed a political theatre company called Red Ladder Theatre. We performed all over England. I was acting, managing, producing, directing, we all did everything. I was with the company for eight years before I was offered the opportunity to teach in San Francisco, and from the moment I got here, I actually felt much more at home than I ever did in England. There's this sort of expansiveness that the space and culture of America gives people. I felt I could breathe in a new way.

I fell in love with San Francisco as a place to live and was based there for 18 years. I have always run my career, if that's what ones calls it, around where I live rather than around where I work. I've never wanted to be a sort of roving, traveling director who's always on the road. That's just not of interest to me. It doesn't suit my sensibility. Plus, to me, theatre is about community, and therefore living where I'm working means something to me.

BSW/D-L: When did you start directing?

Seyd: Right after my teaching commitment was over, which was a year and a half after I arrived in San Francisco. I got involved with several Bay Area theatre companies and eventually ended up as the associate artistic director at A.C.T. I was there until I moved down here two years ago. Of course, I taught through that whole period - at ACT, Stanford, Davis - but my primary teaching was, and still is, working situations with professional actors. That's what I enjoy doing more than anything else. It's an ongoing lab for professional actors who want to have a place to work and stretch themselves and expand their own range. I still commute once a week to teach in San Francisco.

BSW/D-L: Do you teach here at all?

Seyd: I've just started to teach here out of the Los Angeles Theater Center, LATC. The more I've been down here, the more it's become clear to me that it's really important for actors to have a safe environment in which they can do profound work, because the work in this town is so scattershot unless you're at the top of the profession. In the middle and lower reaches of the profession, those people that are guest-starring or doing pilots that aren't being picked up or small roles in film, it's really important to have an environment in which you are being stretched, because in this town, you are being stretched, because in this town, you are playing into your type so much that you can be reduced to your type inside yourself unless you're very careful. If you continually work only within the range of what you already do well, your ability to do more than that begins to atrophy. You're not exercising those muscles, and it's crucial that you have a safe place where you can do that.

BSW/D-L: How do you define that safety?

Seyd: I'm convinced that if you, the actor, are going into an arena that is unfamiliar or not comfortable, if you're exploring a part of your range that is not easily accessible, it's scary because there are reasons why it's not accessible. You have, for some reason, suppressed it and you need to feel safe to risk bringing it out. In a sense, the ideal actor is somebody who can play anybody who's ever existed on the planet. That actor doesn't exist, but if you think about it, the ideal actor has that infinite range and an understanding of every aspect of humanity that's ever existed inside themselves. The journey of the actor should be to develop as much of that as they can.

That's the growth journey - that's the sanity of the profession. It's the market place that creates neuroses, not the craft. Acting is one of the sanest crafts there is. What makes people insane is the competition, the lack of power, the sense of not being in control of your life, the constant rejection. Of course, the truth is that nobody has any power. The producer is at the mercy of the network, which has to listen to the advertisers. Power is an illusion. The act of understanding and accepting that you have no power is actually a very profound thing.

That, in the end, will be sanity-making, because you can create a situation for yourself where you go into an audition, get rejected, allow the hurt to be there, feel the rejection, let it pass through you, and then you go on. What tends to happen instead is that the actor fights and resists the rejection. Rejection hurts. And what happens is that you start to feel smaller and smaller or you stop altogether or you become more and more afraid and tight, and so you end up doing worse and worse. It becomes a Cath-22: An actor needs an open heart, but everything in the environment in which you work makes it more and more difficult to have that open heart.

That's why you need a workshop environment that is safe, where you don't have to think about those things, where you don't have to be afraid. Actors already live in enough state of fear. They don't need to be in a classroom where they're also afraid. That doesn't provide an environment in which you can go places that you haven't been before. Only safety truly gives you the ability to perform with risk. That's the only environment in which that growth can truly happen, by your own volition. It can be ripped from you, it can be pulled out of you, but my feeling is that it never really stays with you when that's how it happens. If you're in an environment in which you're being encouraged to discover growth for yourself and you are being supported in the act of that discovery, then when you find it, it stays.

So the work that I do in my classes is stretch work which enables professional actors to work on types they don't get cast as. As they begin to find that part of themselves and find areas in themselves that they didn't know existed or had suppressed, what's fascinating is that they'll start getting cast that way because they carry those changes with them. They start to bring them into the room with them when they go to an audition.

The other aspect of the work that I focus on is about the whole question of being in the moment and what that's all about. The problem with being in the moment is that as soon as you're told that you should be in the moment, you are aware that you should be, and the moment you are aware that you should be, you're not. It becomes self-conscious. Acting teachers then invent exercises to get the actor to be in the moment and forget the awareness.

For me, the thing that stops actors from being in the moment is anticipation of the next moment. One of the things that actors refuse to acknowledge is how much ahead of themselves they are. They fall into the trap of waiting for the next moment, their cue. In my experience, the only way to be in the moment is to risk the next line not being there - risk falling off the cliff every single moment. Otherwise you're reeling a safety net out in front of you, which is what anticipation actually is doing. If you're standing in the wings or you're thinking about what you're about to say or do, you're already out of the moment. You're already one beat ahead of yourself.

In my approach, I get actors to move through the text thought by thought. Rather than learning lines, the actor focuses on why they say or do what they say or do. This detailed process allows the actor to absorb the material without having to mechanically memorize their lines. The end result allows the actor to be confident in risking the next moment to not be there, which enables them to be effortlessly "in the moment."

For the same reason, when I'm in rehearsals, I never do a first reading. For me, the first read-throughs create an artificial sense of a final result. I'm much more interested in beginning by moving moment to moment with no expectations - just discovery. In using this technique, you're working on why you say what you say.

BSW/D-L: You mean why the character says what he or she says.

Seyd: I don't see a distinction. When you are given a role, you are that character. What is character? Character is the history of the person who is playing the role, meeting the imagination of the writer. It is out of the meeting of those two things that the character arises. So it's not just your responses, because the person who wrote the material thought of somebody specific when they were writing. The imaginative human being that the writer has created is not you, so there isn't anything else you use but you and your own imagination to get to this character.

To think about you and the character as two separate things is a mistake in my book. You're always using the combination of yourself and your attempt to understand who that person is. It's what screws up a lot of actors. This release in to character works in both mediums, film or stage. In film, it's not that the character is reduced to yourself, but you need to make certain that 100 percent of the portrayal is honest because the camera reads you in a way a stage doesn't.

BSW/D-L: So do you think that there's a difference between film and stage acting?

Seyd: I don't believe that the inner work in theatre is any different from the inner work in film. There are differences in the media in the sense that you have to learn how to not be aware of the camera when you start working in film, just as in theatre you mustn't try to wither ignore or over-accept the presence of the audience. And there are certain differences in the theatre in that you do have to project your presence more, whereas in film you have to allow the medium to search out your presence. So there is a shift in energy, but that's not hard for actors to do.

It's always been so strange to me that this is an issue here, because I don't see directors having that problem with the English actors. English actors move between the mediums constantly.

BSW/D-L: Why is it so much easier to do that there?

Seyd: There are two reasons. One is that there's only one actors' union in England, so that makes going from one medium to another easier. Plus, in England, all production takes place in one central city. In America, the center for film is in LA, and theatre is centered in New York. If everything were in Des Moines, the movement would happen much more.

BSW/D-L: It's amazing to me that, with your British background, you can direct something like *A Streetcar Named Desire* with such a profound understanding of American culture.

Seyd: When I came here, I developed a great affection for the American personality. I have some problems with the Puritanical streak in this culture, but I love the innovative and revolutionary streak. People are always willing to try something. England is more conservative. And then there are the class issues. Coming from the culture I do, I think I have a deeper understanding of class than a lot of Americans. I come from a culture in which class is very dominant. However, class exists in this culture and writers write class into their work. They don't always know that they're doing it, but I think that that is an element of the American play, whether it be *Streetcar*, *A View From the Bridge*, or *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Coming from England, I naturally see the class issues in a play, whereas some American directors perhaps wouldn't.

I have a sort of split perspective, having spent half of my life in one culture and the other half in another. But the thing that I identify strongest with in *Streetcar*, and something I have learned throughout my life, is to lead more with my own heart and to trust my instincts about people. I think Williams had a profound understanding of the emotional courage that it takes to be a human being in this world. I feel I have grown to understand that, too. And I have a desire to communicate to an audience that they should respect the emotional courage that it takes for them to exist in this world."