

Soul Talk

BY JOANNA ROTTÉ

Why Become an Actor?

STELLA ADLER ONCE QUOTED HER FATHER JACOB, patriarch of the Yiddish theatre, on the three reasons why someone wants to become an actor: "You don't want to get up early, you don't want to work, and you're afraid to steal." Joking aside, Stella characterized the actor as a person for whom "everyday reality is not enough." What happens to some people in childhood or high school is that they get a taste of the stage and it's as if their blood has changed. They want to become actors and not much else will do.

My own predilection for acting erupted in the eighth grade when I was cast in the title role of a play called *The Father* produced for Girl Scouts. I can't recall rehearsals or a director but I do remember the opening night since my father, seated in the front row, admonished me out loud, "Hey, get that cigarette out of your mouth," even though the cigarette wasn't lit. My all-girls high school didn't offer drama classes or extra-curricular theatre activity, which meant I traveled to Purcell, the all-boys high school, to join the Queens Men. In an earlier day Tyrone Powers had graduated from Purcell although his photo had been removed from the entrance hall when his marriage ended in divorce. The star of Purcell in my day was not a movie idol but an African American Catholic priest, Fr. Clarence Joseph Rivers, who directed the Queens Men in a Shakespeare each fall and a comedy in the spring. So awesome was Fr. Rivers that I was moved to write a musical revue for my own senior class of St. Mary's High, an unprecedented event, in which I also starred as the Stage Manager/Narrator, a creation likely indebted to Thornton Wilder.

It wasn't until college that I encountered a course in acting, as taught by Professor Raymond J. Mullins, a graduate of Ohio State theatre studies. Mr. Mullins's concept of actor education was scene study, whereby we students would prepare assigned roles outside of class. I remember working on the balcony scene from *Romeo and Juliet* with my boyfriend Bill Watson (who later played the Horseman in *Equus* on Broadway under a stage name). We would show our scene to Mr. Mullins in class, and as soon as a moment of untruth arose, that is, as soon as Mr. Mullins didn't believe us, he would jingle a bell. We would stop and try the moment again, and so on throughout the scene until we could perform truthfully in the eyes of Mr. Mullins from beginning to

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end. In my first year of graduate school at Catholic University I studied acting with Bill Graham whose method was also scene study, except that the students would choose the scenes that he would watch, without benefit of a bell, and would then critique. I remember choosing Brecht's *Jewish Wife* because her monologue seemed enticingly dramatic and sad. Perhaps going for drama had been a mistake. I recall standing up on the kitchen table as the "Jewish Wife" and afterwards sensing that Mr. Graham hadn't favored my performance, although his comments were mellow enough, but with Mr. Graham I always guessed I had failed and could never quite figure out why or wherefore. In the succeeding year at the University of Colorado, I took a summer course in acting with a man who was a guest director at the Colorado Shakespeare Festival. He too assigned scenes with the addition of teaching dramatic scansion.

Throughout my semesters of college and graduate school the allure of acting was abetted by experience on stage. I was cast in main stage productions, playing Daisy in *Rhinoceros*, Celia in *Volpone*, Lydia Languish in *The Rivals*, and Phaedra in Racine's *Phaedra*. Outside of school, I apprenticed at the Champlain Shakespeare Festival in Vermont; played a couple of small roles in a revival of *The Women* at the Memorial Theatre in downtown Dayton, Ohio, featuring a cast of glamour girls including Gloria Swanson, Dagmar and Marge Champion; and was hired to perform the female lead in each of nine shows in ten weeks of summer stock at the Town Meeting Playhouse in Jeffersonville, Vermont. But who could say I had ever known what I was doing? I had played a ream of parts in class and out of class I had never been taught acting.

When I entered the doctoral program in theatre at the City University of New York Graduate Center, I met in one of my professors an arbiter of American Theatre, Harold Clurman. I confided in Harold that I wanted to study acting, that I had never really learned a technique of acting, and he recommended I take classes with either Uta Hagen or Stella Adler. Ms. Adler was my choice and for the first time in seven years of theatre education, I came into the presence of a bona fide acting teacher. By herself Stella taught two courses in Acting Technique, two courses in Character, two courses in Script Analysis, and for students at the end of their training, Scene Study, where all the teachings coalesced and all the learning was practiced.

For a few years after Stella's, I played roles in New

York including Ellie Dunn in *Heartbreak*

House, the Bride in *Blood Wedding*, Mrs. X in *The Stronger* (for which artist Louise Bourgeois designed the costumes and publicity poster) and Princess Hunca-munca in Fielding's *Tom Thumb*. Then I went abroad to study Japanese theatre. On returning to the United States three years later, I took a university position in Philadelphia where I performed Shen Te/Shui Ta in the *Good Woman of Setzuan*, Hedda in *Hedda Gabler*, and Argia, the prostitute-made-queen in Ugo Betti's *The Queen and the Rebels*, after which I abandoned the stage and took up directing. That was in the winter of 1990. I have since been working with actors unremittingly and I have developed an indefatigable interest in and attention to the elements of acting, but I have not been acting.

Then in February of this year I played Catwoman in an Equity production of Dublin playwright Marina Carr's *By the Bog of Cats* at Villanova University where Carr is an artist-in-residence. Catwoman is a supporting part, and she is blind, a kind of blind seer, maybe a shaman, someone familiar with herbs, also a bit of a gossip, and loving. She lives with cats, dozens of them, dresses in a coat of cat fur, drinks from a saucer, eats mice, and speaks with a Midland brogue. She is of the bog. In preparation, to build the character inside and out, I watched videos of cats, domestic and wild, and recorded their sounds. I learned cat voices and movements. I consciously absorbed cat qualities, as I imagined Catwoman had unconsciously absorbed cat qualities from living with cats and wearing their skins.

Early on in rehearsal, I had my cat endeavors fortified by a visit to the Brooklyn Academy of Music where I saw Simon Russell Beale as Malvolio in Sam Mendes' production of *Twelfth Night*. Mr. Beale has the guts, the gifts and the craft to produce mimetic acting: he differentiates the role from himself and delineates the character. He created the psycho/physical nature of Malvolio to such an extent — he married a mincing way of walking and pedantic way of talking to the superciliousness of the character — that his boldness as an actor lent me the confidence to establish the uniqueness of Catwoman. Two weeks into rehearsal I decided not to do the role with a kind of conventional blindness, that is, wearing dark glasses or with open eyes dead and staring, but to do the role with eyes closed, which I did,

continued on page 20



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Jig Cook and the Provincetown Players

continued from page 16

forcement from Hutchins Hapgood, and powerful organizational assistance from John Reed. The Provincetown Players provided a stage and a group process for American playwrights; and as a proving ground for Eugene O'Neill, helped publish many of the plays they produced; started careers for actors, directors, and designers; boldly experimented with a wide range of theatrical styles and production methods; pioneered in introducing the Negro into legitimate theatre; based all activity on artistic rather than commercial considerations; enabled spectators to participate in the creative process; and reflected, as well as influenced, the current intellectual renaissance in the United States.

As the group grew in size and experience, its amateur spirit gradually gave way to a more businesslike attitude. After the Players' production of *The Emperor Jones* became a "hit" in 1920, they presented several plays on Broadway. Unable to cope with the artistic and organizational expansion demanded by such undertakings, and torn by internal strife, the group ended its career in the spring of 1922 by declaring a year of rest.

In eight seasons, the Provincetown Players produced ninety-seven plays by forty-seven American authors, the vast majority of which would not otherwise have reached theatre-goers or critics. O'Neill heads the list not only because he is the foremost, but because he offered the largest number of plays for production, fifteen altogether. Susan Glaspell, a gifted and highly polished, witty, and sensitive writer was a close second with eleven titles; Cook had a hand in five plays, on two of which he collaborated with her. The roster continues with Neith Boyce Hapgood, Floyd Dell, Alfred Kreymborg, Rita Wellman, who wrote four plays each; Djuna Barnes, Michael Gold, Edna St. Vincent Millay, John Reed, three plays each; Maxwell Bodenheim, Lawrence Langner, John Chapin Mosher and Wilbur Daniel Steele, two plays each. Most influential among those who had only one play presented by the Players are Lawrence Vail, Edna Ferber, Harry Kemp, Mary Caroline Davies, Pierre Loving, Evelyn Scott, Wallace Stevens, and Theodore Dreiser.

The Provincetown Players' effort to create as a group, to unite in purifying feverish ferment, was very much part and parcel of the last bloom of American inno-

cence. With the onslaught of the twenties that bloom was wilting and it soon died. It was altogether fitting that the collective, conceived in innocence, should end its life with the twenties; its last two years are the record of a courageous struggle to postpone the inevitable. But when the bloom dies, it gives life to the fruit; the yeast that gives rise to the ferment does not vanish, it sustains life in the form of bread. So did American innocence, and so did the Provincetown Players. ♦ 1982

Excerpts from *Jig Cook and the Provincetown Players: Theatre in Ferment*.
Published by The University of Massachusetts Press. Reprinted with the permission of the author and the publisher.

"From man to man, compensating for his brief time on earth, art communicates whole the burden of another's long life experience with all its hardships, colors, and vitality, re-creating in the flesh what another has experienced, and allowing it to be acquired as one's own... What has faded into history it keeps warm and preserves in a form that defies distortion and falsehood. Thus literature, together with language, preserves and protects a nation's soul."

— Alexander Solzhenitsyn from his Nobel Lecture

The Presence of the Light

*The drums are calling
my blood to movement.
They lift my pulse to
jerk and flow in this
sun light of today's
dark rhythm. I hear
them. I hear them
always and I am
thanking them for their
gift by dancing for
the others.
My head rightly refuses
the lead. My legs are
in between my feet
and hands twitch to
move slow. And my guts
leap from their cave
into the presence of the light
with gladness.*

— ANNA GHEESLING©

and it was a revelation.

The only reliable route for connection with my fellow actors was to listen to them. As if by default, I became immersed in listening. I also found myself listening to the audience. There was no danger of having to see the audience — they surrounded three sides of a thrust stage — since my eyes were closed. With my eyes closed, I was void of self-consciousness. I could hear the audience and feel them but their invisibility freed me from worrying about them. Moreover, I could hear and feel them differently each night. I could almost without thinking include the uniqueness of each night's audience in each present moment of *Catwoman*. One night there was a cougher and I let *Catwoman* turn to the cougher and speak in the direction of the cougher, almost challenging the cougher, and the cougher quieted, and when I left the stage, I felt the audience lean forward in a kind of acknowledgement that *Catwoman* had subdued not so much the cougher as the cough. I had nothing to fear from the audience. They were not separate from the performance.

In mainstream modern-day theatre, especially in America, the audience is considered subordinate to the performance. The modern actor is encouraged to forget about the audience, to distance his mind from the audience and become independent of it. But on the other side of the world in Asian Theatre, in particular in the Noh theatre of Japan (according to the treatises of Zeami, master of Noh masters) the actor aspires to "perform in such a way as to keep always in mind the feelings of the audience." And why? So as "to pacify people's hearts and to move the high and the low alike, [and] to bring happiness [and] promote long life." The art of Noh itself, the Noh actor's performing year upon year, teaches the actor to "win the love and respect of the audience," which is surely not the same as to win celebrity and the lust of the public.

Naturally, only in the theatre, and not on film or television, can the actor experience and affect the audience. The live audience is what distinguishes theatre acting from all other. My sojourn as the blind *Catwoman* revealed a prophetic reason why someone wants to become an actor, a reason beyond being afraid to steal or because everyday reality is not enough. A person wants to become an actor so as to be entirely present, of course to the other actors, but also to the audience. He wants to lose his sense of self and become fully alive each night. He wants to stop his chattering mind and become absorbed in the reality that arises then and there on stage on the spot, embracing the given circumstances of the play and accepting the now of the evening. The stage and only the stage will let the actor let the ego go. To enter selfless freedom if only for the space of a beat and to model this freedom for the benefit of the audience — that is why someone wants to become an actor. ♦ 2003

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