

The Cornerstone

John McGinnis

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I never wanted to be an actor. As a child, I was not terribly popular or confident. I was not the class clown, nor was I particularly attractive or physically adept. My test scores did not reveal a notably high I.Q., and I have never been prone to bouts of creative genius or artistic virtuosity of any kind. In fact, I am none of the things that most of the people I know typically associate with great actors. However, according to my nine-year-old daughter, Sarah, I am “the best actor in the world.” Although her opinion means more to me than that of any critic, I find that I am far less certain. As a young man, the acting craft (which I came in to almost by accident) often appeared to me to be a complex and mysterious nonentity – an elusive idea or vapor made up of seemingly subjective and intangible building blocks such as talent (What *is* that stuff anyway?), charisma, imagination, inspiration, and a sort of physical magnetism or beauty. At one point in my early twenties, fueled by a romantic arrogance and the advice of others who believed I possessed some of these qualities, I enrolled in a highly acclaimed London drama academy – only to discover that something was missing. Now, after many life adventures, and three years of study in the Birmingham-Southern College Theatre Department, I feel I have found the missing piece. Culminating this winter with my preparation for the role of Captain Keller in our production of William Gibson’s *The Miracle Worker*, I have come to believe that the cornerstone of successful acting is not a “gift” or “talent.” It is far less glamorous. The cornerstone of successful acting is a good, old-fashioned, rigorous commitment to self-discipline. Focusing primarily on my preparation for the role of Captain Keller, in addition to other lessons and experiences along the way, I will reflect on how I have come to see self-discipline of mind, body, and emotion as the indispensable cornerstone of successful, Stanislavski-based acting.

In his book, *Creating a Role*, the great acting teacher Constantin Stanislavski wrote, “An actor must love dreams and know how to use them” (21). It is no mystery that imagination is

essential to an actor in creating the life of a character on the stage. The text of a play shows only a fraction of the lives of the characters that populate it. The actor must fill in the blanks with imagination. This calls for an extraordinary amount of mental self-discipline. For example, in preparing for my work as Captain Keller, I followed Stanislavski's detailed approach to analysis by studying the "given circumstances" of the play as well as the various contexts (historical, social, literary, etc...) that might have any bearing on the life of the character (Creating, 12). The playwright notes that Captain Keller wears a beard, so I even included in my preparation some research on beards of the period. This search led to exciting discoveries about the psychology of southern males of the period reflected in the popularity of certain beard styles. This information was useful for me in developing both the physicality and voice of the character and lent significant support and justification for much of his manner throughout the play. This sort of detail fires the actor's imagination. It gives it food, stirring it to what Stanislavski calls "artistic enthusiasm" (Creating, 10). However, it doesn't come easily. The actor must begin the search out of self-discipline, hoping to find such stimulation for his imagination. As Stanislavski writes, "The more detailed, varied, and profound an actor makes this analysis by the mind, the greater his chances of finding stimulants for his enthusiasm" (Creating, 11).

My analysis of *The Miracle Worker*, of the life of Captain Keller, and of the various contexts of the play reflected only a fraction of what is described in *Creating a Role*. For example, I could have made endless explorations into the literature of the period, clothing styles, music, Civil War battles, nineteenth century newspaper publishing ... and the list goes on! Each one of these paths would have provided more bricks for my imagination to use in building the life of Captain Keller – with the self-discipline to search them out as the cornerstone.

The discipline of searching out this raw material is, however, only a part of the picture. The real mental work comes in turning this material into imaginary life. Here, an actor must be willing to spend significant time and effort building the life of the character by applying his mind to this single theme. For the actor, there is no substitute for time spent in imagining. In his work *An Actor Prepares*, Stanislavski writes about the actor's use of the "magic if" as a "lever to lift (him) out of everyday life on to the plane of imagination" (54). The actor chooses to exercise the imagination by considering something like, "If everything about life in this room were as it is, but there was a war going on outside, what would change?" The actor goes on to apply such questions to the world of the play, using its given circumstances and the building blocks of the actor's own analysis. The combinations and possibilities are truly endless! In my preparation for the role of Captain Keller, I spent a great deal of time actively imagining his life and his world (i.e. "If his lower back has given him fits at work today, how might that affect the way he speaks to Jimmy about moving those strawberry plants?"). This work provided exciting options for changing the circumstance of a scene in rehearsal, which in turn provided new obstacles and challenges for my fellow actors and me. I feel I only scraped the surface of what was possible and was only limited by time and my willingness to discipline myself in imagining the life of the play.

I experienced similar rewards in my preparation for *Hamlet*. I love to listen to music and almost always play music in my car. In preparing for *Hamlet*, I gave up listening to music in my car for more than seven months, choosing instead to spend the time imagining the possibilities of his world. I imagined his various objectives, circumstances, and relationships. I imagined myself in his place and made mental note of the images and emotions from my own life experience that came to the surface in me. The result was a rich supply of creative options for

me throughout the rehearsal and performance process (and probably no small amount of psychological baggage ... but I'll get to that in minute). I have come to recognize through this process that I typically allow my imagination to be wooed as it may, to chase after anything that remotely entices it. I believe this is probably true for most people (at least the advertising agencies hope so!). For the actor, however, a powerful imagination is one that is properly fed, properly trained, and properly disciplined. Like the great teacher says, "An actor must know how to use his fancy on all sorts of themes. ... Like a child, he must know how to play with any toy and find pleasure in his game" (Stanislavski, Creating, 21). It is hard now to imagine a time when I thought that acting was simply learning the lines before opening night!

A final example of the rewards of mental self-discipline comes from my work on the character of Sidney Black in *Light up the Sky*. Playing opposite Kelsey Shipley (Francis Black) was a joy because of her strong sense of self-discipline. In discussing the nature of the relationship between our characters, we decided to challenge ourselves with an imagination exercise. Imagining our characters' first acquaintance (an event not even referenced in the play), we each imagined our own character's thoughts, choices, impulses, and initiatives, taking turns sharing those choices and actions and responding to one another until we had mutually arrived at the imagined details of their first meeting and subsequent attraction. This self-guided exercise provided a rich context for our work in the production. I am convinced that all human beings possess imagination. Perhaps, as Stanislavski suggests, the imagination of some is more easily coaxed than others (Actor, 57), but it is the practice of coaxing it that provides great material for the actor.

In addition to a self-disciplined mind, the actor must discipline his own body. An actor must possess the physical ability to inhabit the life of the character in the given circumstances

and in those provided by his imagination – otherwise what good is all that work of imagining? Speaking in the guise of the director, Tortsov, in *An Actor Prepares*, Stanislavski declares, “Consequently, before you attempt to create anything it is necessary for you to get your muscles in proper condition, so that they do not impede your actions” (97). The business of acting demands physical rigor. Moments that make it to the pages of a great play are moments of humanity at the extremes. Translating these moments successfully to the stage often demands athletic fitness and flexibility.

In preparation for *Hamlet*, I took up a vigorous personal exercise routine. The play demanded it. In addition, I chose to discipline my body through strict diet and regular rest. This meant, of course, sacrificing much time with family and friends, personal pleasures, and dessert at Christmas dinner. It may have been possible to play the role without such choices but by no means well. For our production, I had to learn a bit of swordplay. To be most effective, I had to practice on my own time, of course. Without the will and ability to discipline myself to these demands, I am certain I would not have played well. The teacher writes, “The actor, no less than the soldier, must be subject to iron discipline” (Stanislavski, *Actor*, 3).

As one student in my stage movement class recently observed, all human beings move differently. They walk differently from one another and have unique quirks and mannerisms. This being so, an actor who wishes to inhabit the life of a character is forced to make adjustments to his own physicality. Sometimes these adjustments are subtle and sometimes bold. He needs to have a mastery of his own body and a skill for changing it. For my work as Captain Keller, I needed to play older than my actual age by approximately fifteen years. Much of what I learned about him in my analysis led my imagination to see his movements in a very specific way – a way that was consistent with his internal life and the given circumstances. In addition, I

imagined him having some specific limitations of movement in his lower back. It took a great deal of practice *outside of rehearsal* to achieve this effect. In addition, I had to have the strength and control to carry the actress playing Anne Sullivan on my back from her bedroom window while appearing to suffer in agony as I put her on the ground. This had to be safe for both the actress and for me. Such demands are common in the theatre, and the actor who is not physically up to the task will suffer from limitations in his ability to inhabit the life of the character – or his ability to play the role at all! An actor must, therefore, work very hard on his own time to develop a detailed understanding of his own body, great flexibility, and freedom of movement. I agree with Stanislavski that, “This process of self-observation and removal of unnecessary tenseness should be developed to the point where it becomes a subconscious, mechanical habit” (Actor, 99).

In *Creating a Role*, Stanislavski draws even greater attention to the flexibility of facial and vocal expressiveness an actor must develop in his craft. He goes on to say that the actor, through disciplined observation of people he encounters in his daily life, “should *constantly* collect materials to help enlarge his imagination for use in creating the external appearance of roles” (116). This sort of thinking assumes a deeply ingrained, proactive approach to the work. Here, there is seemingly no end to the resources an actor may acquire for enlarging his craft by the practice of self-discipline.

Just as each person has a different way of moving, so each one has a unique voice. For the voice of Sidney Black, I drew upon the voice of a man I met in Boston. His accent required a great deal of practice for me to accomplish with good vocal use. A successful actor must practice accents, dialects, and speech patterns on his own time. The more flexible an actor’s

physical and vocal ability, the more successfully he can inhabit the life of any character. Such flexibility can only come through self-discipline.

Finally, how successful can an actor be if his emotional life is in chaos? The acting profession is well known for its divas, scandals, and basket cases. It's not surprising in a craft that demands such rigor and emotional vulnerability – such extreme highs and lows. After working on *Hamlet*, I went through a bout of severe and unexplainable depression. I never could find any cause for it except the one my wife and I came up with. We called it “soul abrasion.” This work (at least in the only ways I know to do it well) has the potential to wreak havoc on an actor's emotional life if not properly checked by a relentless habit of emotional self-discipline. This must become a priority for any actor to do this work successfully. Of this I am convinced.

Emotional mayhem in actors and the ensuing arrogance, neediness, gossip, boasting, selfishness, slander, bickering, and the like, destroy the creative environment. “That is why,” explains Stanislavski, writing on this theme in *Building a Character*, “in our world of the theatre we must learn to hold ourselves well in check. We have to live by rigid discipline” (251).

Furthermore, the great teacher writes:

“If we keep our theatre free from all types of evil we, by the same token, bring about conditions favorable to our own work in it. Remember this practical piece of advice: Never come into the theatre with mud on your feet. Leave your dust and dirt outside. Check your little worries, squabbles, petty difficulties with your outside clothing – all the things that ruin your life and draw your attention away from your art” (251-52).



An actor must be able to bridle his own tongue and not participate in destructive talk, brought on by emotional imbalance. Far too many times, I have seen this lack of self-discipline inhibit my work and the work of my fellow actors.

While working on *The Miracle Worker*, I came to what I believe was an important turning point for me and a good example of how critical emotional self-discipline is in the acting process. To explain it properly I need to rewind about four years to a production of *Macbeth*. During the rehearsal process for that production, I became emotionally paralyzed by doubts. It was approximately two weeks before the performance, and for nearly a week I was unable to make any progress in my acting. Because of this, I was also not able to contribute to the creative environment of the company. “Doubt,” writes Stanislavski in *Creating a Role*, “is the enemy of creativeness” (90). After a week or so it passed, and I was once again able to work with confidence. Ever since that time, I have experienced a similar roadblock in every production. It was during *Hamlet*, one year ago, that my wife pointed out the pattern. At about the same point in the rehearsal process of every show, I experience these extreme feelings of doubt. When the feelings arose during *The Miracle Worker*, therefore, I was able to face them saying, “This will pass in about a week” and discipline myself to continue to do the work. For the first time in four years they did not paralyze me in my process and impede the work of the company. The work of emotional self-discipline seems slow and arduous to me but critical for the success of the acting process.

In considering my own process over the last few years, I feel I have learned a great deal about acting. It is far more practical, and (strangely) far more fascinating to me than it has ever been. I feel I can see the work I need to do ahead of me, and I am looking forward to it with a renewed enthusiasm and commitment to self-discipline. I no longer feel like acting is a great

mystery built on the intangible idea of talent or giftedness. Certainly, it seems, some people are endowed with a great measure of mental, physical or emotional skill or maturity, but without the cornerstone of self-discipline, those don't amount to much. Furthermore, I am convinced that a rigorous commitment to self-discipline can transform even the most mildly "talented" person into a successful actor. I agree with the authors of *A Practical Handbook for the Actor* who write, "The only talent you need is a talent for working – in other words, the ability to apply yourself in learning the skills that make up the craft of acting" (Bruder et. al., 5).

My journey through the Birmingham-Southern College Theatre Department has taught me much about acting. Perhaps the most important thing it has taught me is to be self-disciplined – to do my homework. In this way I can collaborate, contribute to the creative process, and be successful as an actor. For me, success in acting can be hard to define, so I asked my daughter, Sarah. She said, "When I think about good acting, it's when an actor is so good that I forget about who the people acting are, and I feel like I'm watching someone's life." That's good enough for me.

Works Cited

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