

by Jackie Apodaca

THE WORKING ACTOR

What My Favorite Teacher Taught Me

This week's issue of Back Stage West focuses on dance, and it got me thinking. I have never been a dancer—far from it. I endeavored through my years of training to become as much of a “triple-threat” as I could, but dancing was always the weakest point in my triumvirate. And, by “weakest,” I do mean weak. I'm just not blessed with a dancer's sense of, well, dance.

That doesn't mean I don't understand movement. For those of you who haven't had the opportunity to study movement, it is not the same thing as dance, and it is not period styles or good posture. It is the expression of a story or idea through the physical medium. Although it is similar to dance in that it relies primarily on the body, it is a freer form, more in tune with an actor's sensibilities than a dancer's skill.

I was lucky enough to study with two fantastic movement teachers. Charlie Oates, who is now teaching at UC San Diego, gave my classmates and me seemingly impossible assignments that challenged and provoked us. He emphasized storytelling through creative physicality and had a keen sense of humor that influenced our work.

Charlie and I also share an important bit of history. We had the privilege of working with James Donlon, my college movement teacher. In my educational past, which is long and varied and includes two graduate MFA programs, I have never come across anyone as mysteriously wise as Donlon, who still teaches at UC Santa Barbara. He is no less than brilliant. Though not an acting teacher per se, he was the best acting teacher I ever had. He taught me not only how to look at my physical presence but also a new way to think. In his class you never knew what you were learning; sometimes it seemed like I wasn't learning anything at all. But years later I would be walking down the street or having a cup of coffee and suddenly think, “Oh, I get it.”

He regaled us, his students, with a few basic tenets of performance. There were about seven of these, including levels and musicality—and a bunch of others of which I have no recollection. But the one that stands out in my mind, in my work, and now in my teaching, is the one that sounds the simplest: “If you don't know what to do, stand still.”

It may sound strange. Actors are used to performing, propelling the story forward, displaying, feeling, and emoting. To act is to do, to take action, so it seems unlikely that standing still will be much of a tool. But, oh, the power of those nine little words. They give you permission to let go. They dissipate the pressure to do the “right” thing, leaving you with a chance at discovery.

We've all been there. Whether doing a scene in class, performing a role onstage for the 100th time, or standing under the lights on a film set, we've found ourselves at a loss. We suddenly realize that we lack the emotion we think we need, we become acutely aware of ourselves as actors and lose our sense of make-believe, or we become disproportionately nervous about our work. Performance is delicate: Lots of things can throw you, even if you are prepared and professional.

In these moments many actors make the same mistake. They push the performance along. They go on the attack. If you have ever felt a scene flounder, you have probably felt that urge to take control, to throw your back against it and push the weighty beast forward with all your might. This goes for comedies, in which you might turn up the “funny” quotient in a die-hard effort to get laughs, and in dramas, in which you might struggle even harder to channel those elusive tears. This was certainly what I had always done. Of course we know what usually happens when we push this way. The strain shows, and the performance becomes forced and tense, and the more we struggle to keep the audi-

ence with us, the more they drift. It's a tricky thing about art. It's hard to be inspired when you're trying to be good.

Donlon's principle of stillness prevents this pushed, artificial performance from taking over. When you stop “trying” and just stand there, very important things happen. You listen. You breathe. You come back to “the moment.” When you stand still, you are confronted by the world around you and your presence in it. You are catapulted into the present. From the here and now you are able to hear yourself, your ideas, and your instincts, and then you are able to move forward with a fullness and insight that can't be faked.

One important distinction I want to make is that standing still is not the same thing as doing nothing. When you do nothing, you stop: You aren't listening or embracing the present. When you stand still, on the other hand, you are fully awake and alive and are listening. You are ready for the pure impulse, the new idea, or the resurgence of the old truth that will reconnect you to your character and your performance.

Though the idea of stopping in the middle of a rehearsal or performance to “stand still” is scary, it is surprising just how fast new inspiration can come when you open up to it. In live performance just a beat or two can be enough to get you regrouped. In rehearsals you have the luxury to let the quiet moment stretch out a bit, but frankly it doesn't take that long to find an organic impulse once you stop the busywork.

Of course this technique translates to “real life,” as well. Struggling to get an acting career off the ground, or, once you've launched it, the work to keep it afloat, can be relentless. There is so much to do: the classes, the self-promotion, the hunt for the bigger and better agent, the submissions, the auditions, the money job. It can get pretty hectic; just getting around town can be exhausting. It's easy to fall into the grind, checking

things off your list and moving ahead in a rush with no awareness of each individual step. There is the danger, too, that all this business can obscure what is happening. When you are constantly doing, driving forward on a preconceived path, it can be hard to live moment-to-moment. Just as extraneous movement can detract from a performance, nonessential or hasty efforts can get in the way of your career, not to mention your life. It's better, as Donlon asserts, to stop and wait for an impulse to emerge. Admit you don't know what comes next, and be brave enough to wait and see.

I'll say it again, as it bears repeating: “If you don't know what to do, stand still.” Surely, whether onstage or off, we can afford to give ourselves a minute here and there to reconnect with our inner artist and wait for our impulses to catch up with our bodies.